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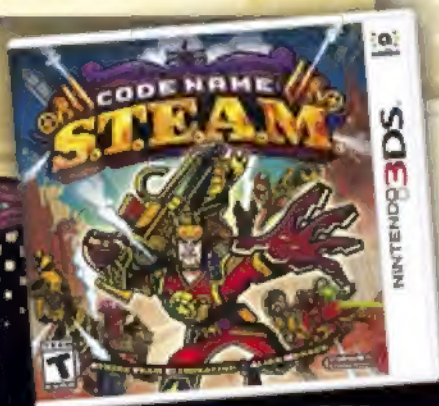
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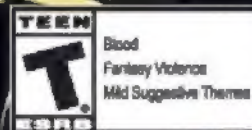
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ANDY McNAMARA
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Dream A Little Dream

We all do it. While waiting through that loading screen online or talking games with friends at your local watering hole, sooner or later you land on that classic conversation of what sequel or series you are dying to play.

You know, the one "they just have to bring back!"

While there are certainly a lot of great games on the horizon, I tend to get my hopes up about a number of notable games I wish were in production — unreasonably so in some cases, but I do it nonetheless.

Top on my list is Metroid. I don't mean some stupid Team Ninja slaughtering of all I hold sacred about the series; I mean a real-deal 2D classic forged in Kyoto by the master designers at Nintendo. I'm talking first class all the way. Nintendo is welcome to make a follow-up to Prime after that, but I'd love to see the publisher knock a gorgeous 2D Metroid out of the park first.

Next on my list is Red Dead Redemption. I'm torn about whether I want a true sequel or a new tale with a new cast of characters. Push comes to shove, I think I would prefer to see what Rockstar could do with a blank canvas while sticking to the gritty, open-world Western formula.

And finally (because lists are best when kept to three entries), I can't help but beg for the next entry in the Elder Scrolls series. Skyrim was breathtaking, and I get a little giddy when I think about what Todd Howard and the crew at Bethesda Studios will do once they return to that fabled franchise. Every time they show me a game, I walk away in awe, and I expect nothing less from their next entry (which could be a ways off if Fallout is the next title from the team, but that would be pretty awesome, too).

Check out our feature outlining the games of spring and beyond on page 56, and hit me up on Twitter at @GI_AndyMc to let me know what games you are dying to see make a glorious return, because I always love dreaming about what's next.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



Rise Of The Tomb Raider

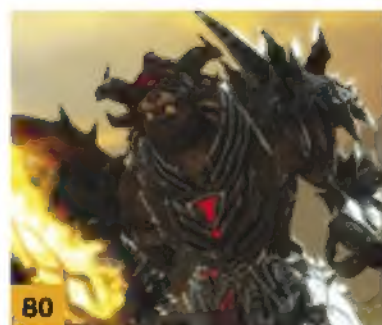
Lara Croft's experience on Yamatai Island in the 2013 Tomb Raider reboot changed her. She learned to overcome while surviving against the island's inhabitants and dangers. In Rise of the Tomb Raider, Lara continues to fight and explore with the skills she learned on Yamatai, but against a new enemy and with a new goal. **by Ben Reeves**



28 Interview: Nigel Lowrie



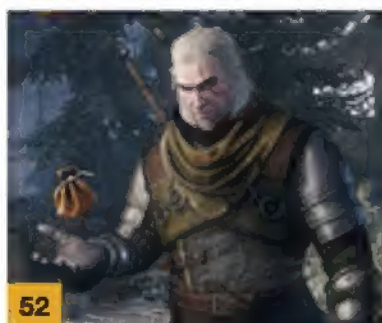
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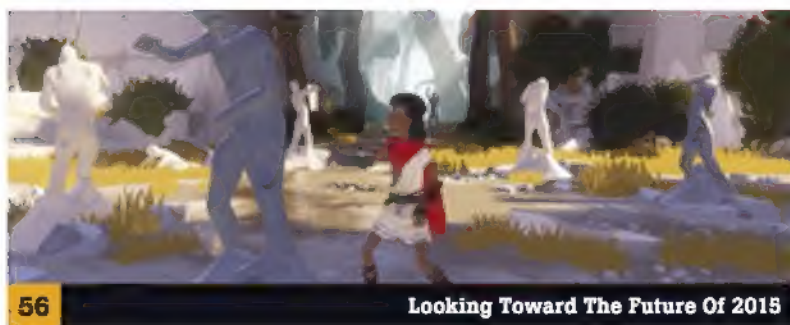


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The Weapon Lord



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Looking Toward The Future Of 2015

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regulars

» 6 Feedback

This month readers tell us how wrong we are for skewering their favorite games in the latest Sacred Cow Barbecue. Readers also declare how wrong we were about the games we chose for our top sci-fi games list. Readers did agree with us, however, when it comes to being excited about No Man's Sky.

» 12 Connect

The holidays were rough for gamers trying to play online, so we recounted what went wrong during the days following Christmas. We also analyze recent video game fashion trends, chat with someone who makes swords for a living, and learn about the surprising history of Phoenix Wright.

» 78 Previews

This month we play the Halo 5: Guardians' beta and see what pro gamers think of the changes. We also see what's new for Guild Wars 2, examine how Amplitude has changed since its PlayStation 2 days, and find out what's happening next in Battlefield.

» 90 Reviews

Game releases have slowed since the 2014 holiday season, but we still have plenty to play with reviews for Saints Row: Gat Out of Hell, Life is Strange, #IDARB, and Hand of Fate.

» 100 Game Over

Lara Croft is a busy lady who, despite living in a large mansion with a butler, likes to travel as much as possible. We track her globe-hopping antics to see everywhere she's been in the past and throughout two separate reboots.



Sacred Cow Barbecue got readers talking this month, but not everyone enjoyed the roast. Thankfully, our Top 25 Sci-Fi Games picks went over flawlessly...in the alternate universe we choose to live in.

The Sky's The Limit

Thank you for your cover story on No Man's Sky. The article taught me so much, and No Man's Sky has become my most anticipated game of 2015. Hearing about a game with nearly infinite worlds is great, and seeing it in a trailer is even better, but reading first-hand impressions from people who visited Hello Games can't be beat.

Adam Kaplan
via email

Your cover story on No Man's Sky was awesome. The new information was really interesting, but still has me dying to explore the game for myself. My only skepticism comes from the fact that the game has such a massive scope, but I'm confident in Hello Games based off of what I have read so far. Regardless of the outcome, I commend them for such an undertaking. If No Man's Sky fulfills its bold promises and plays well, indie might have to stand for Incredible New Development in Electronics.

Sammy Caloras
via email

Despite their continued rise in popularity, it's easy to dismiss the relevance of indie games compared to industry juggernauts like Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto. You

wouldn't think that based on the feedback we receive for No Man's Sky, however; Hello Games' open-galaxy sandbox has garnered massive buzz and excitement amongst gamers, and is without a doubt one of the most anticipated games of 2015. It's too early to tell if No Man's Sky will live up to the hype, but you can learn more at gameinformer.com/nomanssky.

Lost In Space

Somehow I just knew Earthbound would not make your Top 25 Sci-Fi Games of All Time list (issue 261). Perhaps it's not a game that jumps to mind, compared to standouts like Mass Effect 2 and Super Metroid. However, here is a game that has a prophetic robot bee, zombies, UFOs, space aliens, an anthropomorphized pile of vomit, psychic abilities – did I mention that to defeat the final antagonist, you must put the consciousness of your heroes into robot bodies and send them decades into the past? Everything about this game bleeds science fiction, the real pulpy kind – certainly more so than Chrono Trigger. Earthbound fans are used to it not getting any love, but perhaps they would appreciate reading the pleas of another fan in your Feedback column.

Adam Pearson
via email

Regarding your Top 25 Sci-Fi Games list; I know that the whole point of these lists is to spawn debates about the omissions, but I really feel you missed a big one with Starflight. Starflight brought two huge innovations to mainstream games: procedurally generated content (unusual outside of roguelikes) and a real sandbox environment where the player could spend hours and hours discovering new worlds. And spend those hours we did – hundreds of them, in fact. Making this list without Starflight is like making a Top 25 Fantasy Games list without Wizardry or A Bard's Tale!

Brendan Glackin
via email

While we love listening to readers complain, we don't exclude certain games on our lists to get people talking; like everyone else, we simply have our own opinions. It just so happens that our opinions are also awesomer than everyone else's, which is why we tend to go with them. But thanks for the Wizardry and A Bard's Tale suggestions, Brendan – if we ever make a Top 25 Fantasy Games list, we'll give serious consideration to omitting them as well.

Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

Not Kidding Around

I am a 10-year-old girl and I already find that Game Informer hates the 3DS! I have been reading Game Informer for a long time, and you people have not once had a magazine based on 3DS games. I find that offensive and so do a lot of people. If you will have a Game Informer based on 3DS games, I might just start reading Game Informer more.

Paris Pearson
via email

There are a number of ways that we could describe the prospect of trying to devote an entire issue's worth of coverage to the 3DS' sparse lineup. Unfortunately for us, our New Year's resolution was to stop making snide comments to 10-year-old girls. We'll do our best, Paris.

Relishing The Roast

I just got done reading the newest Sacred Cow Barbecue article (issue 261) and absolutely loved it. Most of the games you bashed are among my all-time favorites. It was so entertaining and hilarious to hear them talked about like that; I couldn't stop laughing. No matter how much hate mail you may receive for it, you will definitely have good-humored gamers on your side. Keep the roasts coming.

Ryan Siegel
via email

Issue 261 was a roller coaster of emotions. From your evisceration of Mass Effect 2 in Sacred Cow Barbecue to the heaping of accolades you gave it in your Top 25 Sci-Fi Games list, you had me laughing through tears and following them up with spontaneous shouts of glee in just a few short pages. I sincerely thank you for tearing apart my favorite game of all time only to restore it to its rightful place in the video game pantheon, you magnificent, sadistic bastards.

Luisa Goodwin
via email

Even the greatest series are due their comeuppance, and we have no problem being the ones to dole out a little hate for the games that we love the most. Unfortunately, not everyone read the article with a sense of humor – or even an understanding of how roasts work...

Feeling The Flames

I am not a subscriber of your magazine, and based on your Fourth Inaugural Sacred Cow Barbecue article (issue 261), I will never become one. I'm not sure if the writer means to sound like a snide, pretentious hipster, but as a gamer and a fan of the honest reviews this magazine gave years ago, that is all they come across as. He went so far as to critically rip apart eight of the most popular and possibly highest grossing games that have ever been released. More to the point, he made me, a possible subscriber and revenue source for your magazine, feel intellectually inferior for liking and playing them. I don't have a problem with critiques, but they should be based on graphics and gameplay, not trashing well-loved characters from our childhood and telling Japanese developers to make more first-person shooters. Since enjoying Kingdom Hearts and Assassin's Creed makes me stupid, I guess you won't care about losing my subscription money!

Katharine Addison
via email

I enjoy reading GI's reviews and stories, but this month's Sacred Cow Barbecue was a bit much for my taste. I understand the writer has his own opinions, and while I do agree with some of his theories, I don't appreciate being degraded for playing games like Assassin's Creed, Minecraft, Kingdom Hearts, and Dead Space. It's nice that the author thinks everyone who plays Minecraft is a "hopeless mope," but that is just an opinion and should be left out of the article, which seems more like a roast. While it can be humorous to some, I feel that it's poor writing: even a normal college English course teaches us not to direct our views directly at the reader. If he wants to call me and others a hopeless mope, then he should find a different way to do it, like politicians and other news media outlets.

Larry Prado
via email

Insults and threats of canceled subscriptions are pretty normal responses to Sacred Cow Barbecue, but this is the first time we've been told to act more like politicians. We're going to take that as an endorsement for public office and start working on some campaign slogans. In the meantime, you can check out more humorous Sacred Cow responses at gameinformer.com/mag.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Am I the only one who thinks that Blizzard's Overwatch and Gearbox's Battleborn have veeeery similar concepts?"

Nope.

"How is it that after eviscerating Mass Effect 2 in Sacred Cow, it somehow was number one on your Top 25 Sci-Fi Games list? Indoctrination?"

Since we wouldn't know if we've been indoctrinated, we technically can't rule it out.

"Why haven't you reviewed Five Nights At Freddy's?"

Thanks to Chuck E. Cheese's The Rock-Afire Explosion band, we already lived that nightmare as children.

Most Honest Opening Line To A Feedback Letter:

"Yes, this is an email to complain about you guys not including a game on your list."

Best Email Accidentally Sent To G.I.:

"Hey, let's change our brunch time to 11:00am, I can't make 10:00am."

Thanks,
Rita"

Question Of The Month:

Who is the unluckiest video game character and why?



(Left) Kim and Ben Hanson pose with Nolan North and Troy Baker, A.K.A. the voice actors for every single character in the history of video games.

(Right) Meet Game Informer's newest associate editor, Brian Shea. Welcome to the team, Brian! Now get to work.

GI SPY
continued on page 6

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind

- **28%** No Man's Sky Hype
- **22%** Sacred Cow Barbecue Responses
- **20%** Fav Games For BFFs
- **18%** Top 25 Sci-Fi Omission Gripes
- **12%** Disgruntled Kingdom Hearts Fans



The Friend Zone

In issue 261, we asked readers what their favorite game to play with friends is. While the majority of respondents favor sparring with their buddies in fighting games, others opt to pick up a guitar or gun for co-op. Here are some responses.

I'd have to say Rock Band. My friends and I can play for hours as our virtual band (shout out to The Flying Dutchmen!) with the hundreds of songs I've downloaded over the course of Rock Band 1, 2, and 3. The feeling of spending a whole night on the endless playlist is one of fulfillment and accomplishment – assuming you have the willpower and patience to play through it!

John Scarpulla

Definitely Smash Bros. When the GameCube version came out, my friends and I maxed out the time counters for our usernames multiple times over (that's 9,999 minutes, or around 166 hours each). Sitting next to your friends, yelling, screaming, crying, laughing, eating, punching each other – that will never be replaced by online gameplay.

Pete

My favorite game to play with friends is Star Wars Battlefront on the PS2. I've been playing local multiplayer matches in this game for six years, and it's still a joy to play today. I love playing as all the different classes; I have really high hopes for the DICE reboot and can't wait for its release.

Joe Hoffman

(Left) Dan Tack pitched Hearthstone senior producer Yong Woo on making a raid boss named "D-Tack," but Woo wasn't buying it.

(Right) Dan also caught up with professional streamer and Hearthstone heartthrob, Jeffrey "Trump" Shih.



GI SPY

continued on page 8

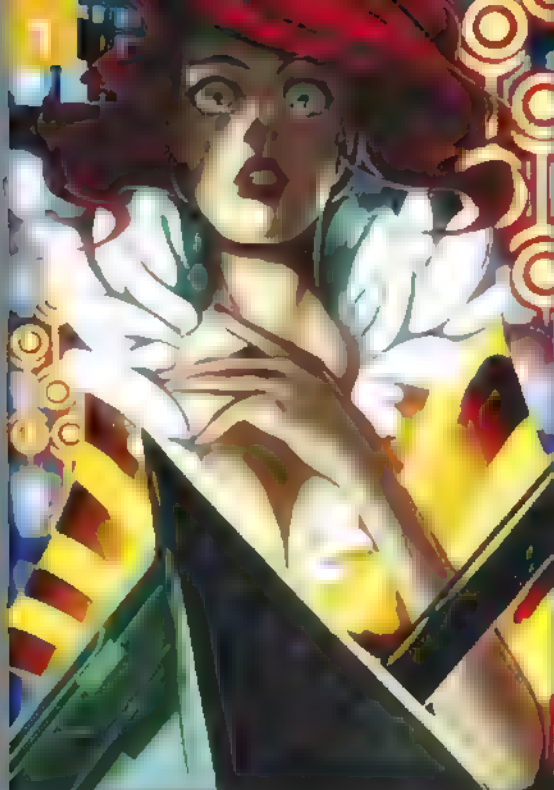


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1 Kyousuke Imadori

Illustration of the character Dredd from the comic book series Judge Dredd

2 Joshua Perry

Illustration of the character Dredd from the comic book series Judge Dredd

Dredd's long-lost brother

3 Ryan Voyles

Illustration of the character Dredd from the comic book series Judge Dredd

but this art makes us want to see this crossover happen

4 Adriel Oviedo

Illustration of the character Dredd from the comic book series Judge Dredd

games, any form of change is a good thing



Submit your art for a chance to win our monthly prize. Please include your name and return address. Entries become the property of Game Informer and cannot be returned. Send to: Game Informer Reader Art Contest | 724 First Street North, 3rd Floor | Mpls, MN 55401 or Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

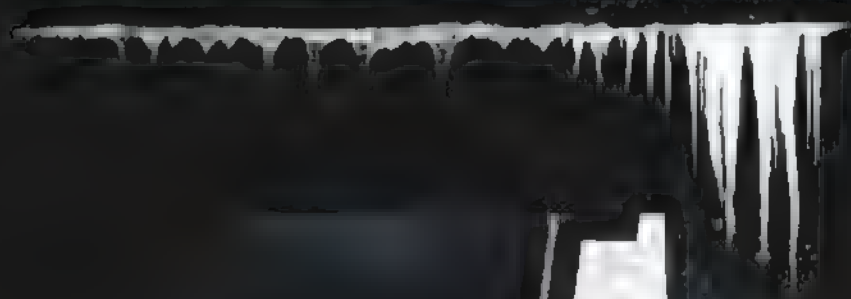
(Left) We're not sure why Kyle decided to dress like a bear and hide behind a giant Gex statue during this month's visit to Crystal Dynamics, but it was a good reminder why we don't send him on more work trips.

(Right) Kyle's impromptu reenactment of the bear attack on this month's cover was also incredibly weird, but the leads at Crystal Dynamics didn't seem to mind.

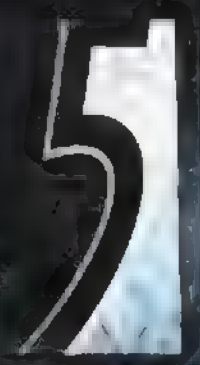


5 ASCENT GUM

AN INTENSIFYING WINTERMINT



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Collateral Damage

Hackers take down PSN and Xbox Live over the holidays

This past holiday season, millions of people around the world looked forward to gaming sessions on PSN and Xbox Live. Some received a PS4 or Xbox One and were eager to put their new systems through their paces, while others anticipated spending the holidays digging into *Destiny*, *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*, and countless other games' online modes. For periods during the Christmas holiday, however, both PlayStation Network and Xbox Live were rendered useless by a DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) attack, which floods a network with traffic and brings the servers down, by a hacker group called Lizard Squad. **by Matthew Kato**

PSN and Xbox Live were down on Christmas Day, with the latter coming back the next day. Both services were intermittent for periods after the initial attack, but PSN was hit particularly hard; its outages continued as the new year approached. The group's motivation ranged from simple mayhem and laughs to advance marketing for a Lizard Squad product allowing users to perform attacks similar to the one that took down the gaming networks.

Lizard Squad's campaign of anarchy started before the Christmas attacks with a bomb threat tweet that diverted the plane of Sony Computer Entertainment Online president John Smedley, and a PSN outage around the same time. Its other publicized attacks included Xbox Live, *Grand Theft Auto Online*, and Blizzard's *battle.net*, as well as the promise at the beginning of December that the group would take down services on Christmas.

■■■■■■■■■■

"In this new era of Internet terrorism, the attackers are anonymous and innumerable, motives can change to suit any need, and there will always be the incentive by one side to capitulate to the other."

The Christmas outage was bad enough, but it could have been worse if not for the intervention of Internet entrepreneur Kim Dotcom, who offered members of Lizard Squad vouchers for lifetime accounts at his Mega file-hosting site with 500GB of encrypted online storage. The vouchers were for 3,000 one-year accounts (which were then converted to lifetime premium ones), which cost \$99 apiece. Lizard Squad says that it turned around and sold them for \$50 each.

In an episode of Twitter personality FaZe Keemstar's "Drama Alert" show, the hacker group acknowledged it accepted Dotcom's offer and dropped the attacks, but both Kim Dotcom and the Lizard Squad members on the show agreed that the online networks didn't resume service immediately due to their own inherent shortcomings. As they came back online, Dotcom explained, there was a flood of legitimate traffic looking to reconnect and access content. "It's a kind of scenario that these gaming networks never had to deal with before," he said, "and I don't think they have the capacity. They have all these consoles making the requests at the same time, so that is probably their own console DDoS-ing their own network."

Despite the attacks stopping and the services crawling back online, the situation was taking on a life of its own. FaZe Keemstar's show also featured a guest from another hacker group called Finest Squad. This member claimed they stopped Lizard Squad and thus brought the services back online by pulling down some of Lizard Squad's infrastructure such as websites and Twitter accounts. The Finest Squad member also claimed they doxxed (making personal information public) some of Lizard Squad's members, but Lizard Squad asserted that it was Dotcom's vouchers alone that stopped their actions and that Finest Squad had nothing to do with it.

That we cannot know for sure if Finest Squad's actions did or did not affect or influence

Lizard Squad's actions illustrates the hazy nature of hacker activity in general. In this new era of Internet terrorism, the attackers are anonymous and innumerable, motives can change to suit any need, and there will always be the incentive by one side to capitulate to the other. Just look at the ongoing dispute over whether North Korea or another party was behind the recent hacking of Sony Pictures' internal emails and data.

Dotcom did gamers a favor by enticing Lizard Squad to stop its attacks, but in paying to do so he arguably further incentivized future actions by Lizard Squad or similar groups – even if he fundamentally disagreed with what happened. "I think by hurting the Christmas celebration of families around the world you're doing a disservice to this kind of image that hackers have out there," he said, "and it plays into the hands of governments around the world that try to go hard against cybercrime. They try to turn hackers into terrorists, and by doing these types of attacks you guys are basically playing into their hands, and it's basically counterproductive in my view."

Neither Sony nor Microsoft would comment on the situation when we inquired, citing security reasons. Sony has offered gamers compensation in the form of a discount to its online marketplace as well as adding extra five days to the accounts of PS Plus members. The FBI is investigating the matter, and the Obama administration has also started working on a proposal to crack down on DDoS attacks, but both Dotcom and the Lizard Squad members interviewed during FaZe Keemstar's show believe that stopping cyber terrorism comes down to companies like Sony and Microsoft simply investing the time and money in proper security measures.

In the face of such self-serving logic, unfortunately, there seems little average gamers can do to stop future attacks. We can only turn on our consoles and cross our fingers. ♦



The Gaming Side

Microsoft Announces Xbox One Integration, Holograms & More

by Matthew Kato

In January, Microsoft unveiled more details about Windows 10 (currently in public beta), including gaming-related features familiar to Xbox One users as well as new, useful features for both PC and Xbox One gamers.

MERGING WINDOWS 10 & XBOX ONE

Via an Xbox app on the Windows 10 desktop, PC users can avail themselves of many of the features currently enjoyed by Xbox One gamers – a My Games section, the ability to record and

broadcast game clips, a friends list, activity feed, achievements, and more. Conversely, developers are also free to bring their applications from Windows to Xbox One. This is part of a larger initiative to bring Windows into the Xbox One, but Microsoft said it will announce more on that at GDC in March.

The gap between the two platforms is also bridged via cross-platform play between Windows 10 PCs and Xbox One. The event highlighted the feature using *Fable Legends* (above), in which a PC user can easily join a friend playing the game in co-op or competitive play via the Xbox app. The game is tabbed for simultaneous release later this year for both platforms. Other first- or third-party titles offering cross-platform play, however, were not announced.

DIRECTX 12

Games like *Fable Legends* also benefit from Windows 10's DirectX 12. Microsoft boasts that the latest collection of programming interfaces in DirectX 12 increases performance and also cuts down on the power consumption of DirectX 11

by half – useful for delivering higher-end graphics for mobile games. Microsoft says hundreds of studios are using DirectX 12, including Epic Games' Unreal Engine 4 and Unity.

STREAMING FROM YOUR XBOX ONE

Like its competitor Sony, Microsoft is getting into streaming, but in a different manner. Windows 10 can stream games from an Xbox One onto a PC on the same local-area network. This year you will be able to play games from your Xbox One on your Windows 10 PC or tablet, and even turn off your Xbox One from your PC when you're done.

Microsoft says it's currently exploring the possibility of streaming the other way: your PC games to your Xbox One, but that functionality was not announced. If this were to become possible, it would significantly blunt the impact of Valve's Steam Machines initiative and perhaps expand the Xbox One's catalog more than the current scope of PlayStation 4's PlayStation Now service (presently only streaming PS3 titles).



Of Windows 10

MICROSOFT HOLOLENS

There has been talk for some time that Microsoft would get involved in virtual reality gaming to go up against Oculus Rift and Sony's Project Morpheus. Instead Microsoft announced that it is exploring augmented reality via holograms. HoloLens is an initiative scheduled to debut sometime in the Windows 10's lifespan where users can see and manipulate 3D holograms in

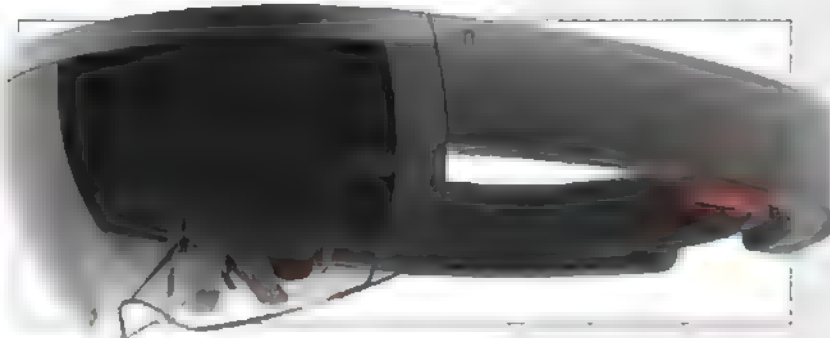
users' real environments via a headset featuring motion/gesture tracking, voice recognition, and sound placement of holograms.

Users can interact with holograms, including being able to place them in specific places in physical space, share them with others, and construct them with a 3D printer. Naturally, HoloLens has some intriguing video game possibilities, and there are already at least two Minecraft projects

being worked on by the franchise's developer, Mojang (owned by Microsoft). Minecraft developer Jen Bergensten says one of the projects is a "toy," while the other is more like a proper game.

Having just put the Kinect peripheral to rest, it will be interesting to see what kind of interest there is from video game developers to use HoloLens, and thus, how much Microsoft supports it in the medium. ♦

Contrary to this picture from Microsoft, the HoloLens' field of manipulation does not fill the entire room in front of you, but rather a small area seven to eight inches in front of your face



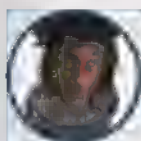
FASHION POLICE

We rounded up a panel of totally real experts to comment on the hottest video game fashions. Here are their unfiltered thoughts.

THE PANELISTS



TAMMY ARMSTRONG
5th Grader



BOBBY BRUCE
Painter



CYAN BRODDERICK
Author



AMY ARNOLD
Diva



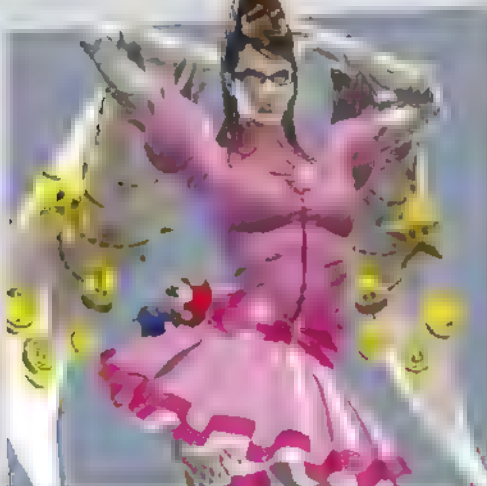
CORTANA

Brodderick:

Armstrong:

Arnold:

Bruce:



BAYONETTA

Armstrong: "It looks like a giraffe gave birth to a full-

Bruce:

Arnold:

Brodderick:



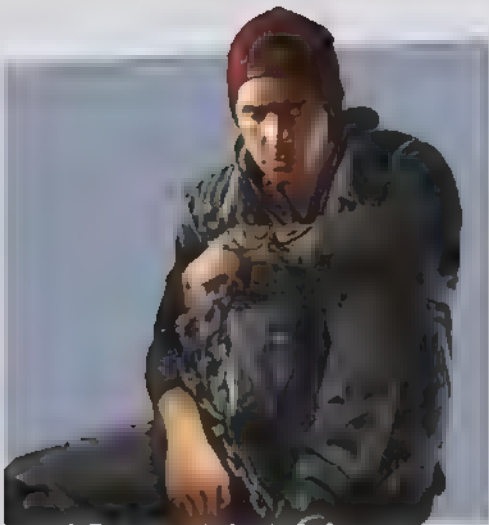
DAMON

Arnold:

Brodderick:

Armstrong:

Bruce:



DELSIN

Arnold: [Illegible text]

Armstrong: [Illegible text]

Bruce: [Illegible text]

Armstrong: [Illegible text]



LIGHTNING

Arnold: [Illegible text]

Armstrong: [Illegible text]

Bruce: [Illegible text]

Armstrong: [Illegible text]

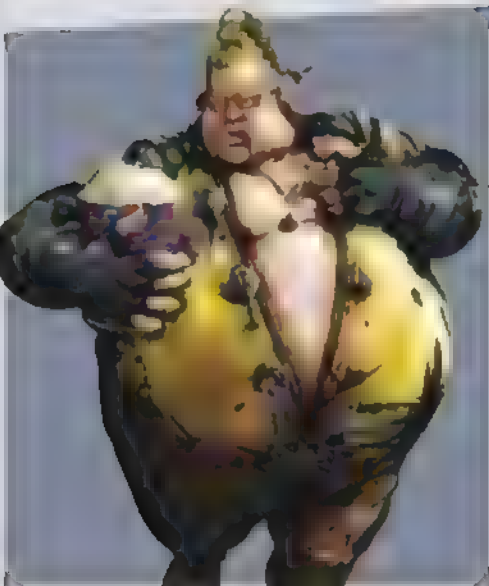


QUIET

Armstrong: [Illegible text]

Bruce: [Illegible text]

Armstrong: [Illegible text]



RUFUS

Arnold: [Illegible text]

Armstrong: [Illegible text]

Armstrong: [Illegible text]



SONIC

Arnold: [Illegible text]

Bruce: [Illegible text]

Armstrong: [Illegible text]



SORA

Armstrong: [Illegible text]

Bruce: [Illegible text]

How The Hilarious Pop Culture References Became A Hallmark Of Ace Attorney



by Kimberley Wallace

Ace Attorney is known for its tense courtroom trials and exaggerated finger-pointing objections. The franchise has always had a sense of humor, which extends to its localization team. Throughout the years, they've been inserting pop-culture references into the Ace Attorney games, from sly nods to Star Wars and *Wayne's World* to reenacting Gollum's infamous "My preccccciuuuus" line. Diehard fans have taken notice, compiling them on wikis dedicated to the franchise. At this point, they've become a part of the Ace Attorney identity. Localization director Janet Hsu provided some insight into how these references came to life.

The very first Ace Attorney game set the tone, making references to *The Simpsons*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and Elvis Presley thanks to Capcom staff members like Alex Q. Smith and J. Patrick Riley. Now these little references seem par for the Ace Attorney course, but many localization teams didn't have that luxury of adding their own spin. "There was often a struggle between the Japanese staff who may or may not have understood the target language, but wanted their games to be translated more literally, and external translation teams who wanted to localize the games to make them less awkward linguistically and more accessible culturally," Hsu explains.

Capcom has built up its localization team since the early 2000s, allowing plenty of room for growth and

experimentation. By the time the first Ace Attorney game rolled around, the team had earned the freedom to alter the script. Exactly what made them decide to include pop-culture references? "I think a lot of American humor is based on making clever references to things, so it's an element of speech that is used by everyone from prominent comedians to average people like you and me," Hsu says. "In that sense, I think what makes the characters of Ace Attorney feel real and relatable to players is their ability to make jokes about things that players may joke about with their own friends. This is in contrast to the Japanese version, which is more pun-based, because puns are a more common source of humor in Japanese culture due in part to the structure of the language."

Hsu joined Capcom right after the first game launched in 2005 and was put in charge of the localization team. It was her choice to either ditch the pop-culture references or continue to use them. "The feedback we received about the first game showed that the overwhelming majority of people really loved the references, so I decided to keep and develop them into a hallmark of the Ace Attorney series," Hsu says. Since then, Hsu has not looked back and enjoys watching people find them and take to social media and message boards. "It makes me happy to know when I've made someone's day with a sly reference to a Metal Gear Solid line about cornered foxes or reminded them of the theme song to the Carmen Sanchez TV game show."

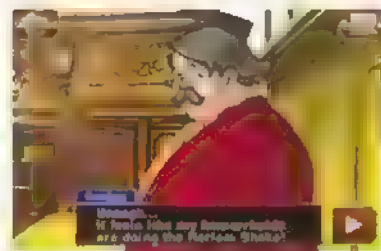
The references have been widespread from MC Hammer to *The A-Team*, with plenty of callbacks to the '80s and '90s. Hsu's favorites include the Final Fantasy "spoony bard" line, the Monty Python "(Dirty) Hungan Phrasebook" reference, and the late-'80s Zelda cartoon line, "Well, excuseuuuuse me, Princess!"

"Having grown up in the late '80s and early '90s, the Zelda one just sort of popped into my head, complete with the whiny Link voice, while I was translating the second game," Hsu says. "It was the first of many spontaneous flashes that would provide me with just the right reference for the situation as I was translating."

Who would have thought that something not in the Japanese version could become so ingrained in Ace Attorney's identity? As Hsu says, "I think it's safe to say that at least for me, it isn't 'Ace Attorney' without the references."

LOOKING BACK AT SOME MEMORABLE REFERENCES

The Harlem Shake
featured in Trials and Tribulations



Fresh Prince of Bel Air
featured in Justice For All



Final Fantasy's Spoony Bard
featured in Trials and Tribulations



Kelis' Milkshake Song
featured in Trials and Tribulations





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THE WEAPON LORD

Discovery Channel Star's Amazing Video Game-Inspired Swords

Inspired by the video games and fantasy movies of his youth, Mike "Irish Mike" Craughwell started making large, outlandish replicas of swords from games and film and posting his projects to YouTube. He's now parlayed this viral success into a thriving replica sword business and *Big Giant Swords*, a new Discovery Channel reality show. **by Matt Helgeson**

How did you get into making swords?

I grew up in the '80s. There was a lot of fantasy/sci-fi/post apocalyptic stuff going on. That's the root cause. The post apocalyptic Mad Max stuff was actually a great way to segue into this. Making a convincing post-apocalyptic looking weapon is fairly easy, so it was the perfect starting point – trash wired to other trash. Twelve-year-old me could do that. It wasn't until I got to art college that I had access to the tools to make metal stuff from scratch, so my stuff got more elaborate and finished looking

Do you favor newer techniques or older forging techniques?

I've nothing against the old techniques, but I'm a trained welder/fabricator, so that's the angle I approach problems with. I find the "new techniques" as you call them – arc welding is nearly a hundred years old – are more suited to gigantic and weird swords.

How did you get into reproducing video game swords?

In 2007 I got commissioned to make the Buster Sword. Nearly everyone my age in Ireland has played Final Fantasy VII, so I leaped at the chance. I wasn't very good at

the time – that sword is shockingly crude looking to me now – but I started getting emails from strangers. In the video I huff, puff, stagger, and exhaust myself, yet all these strangers wanted one, too. You never know.

Do you play games as a hobby? How much do you study swords in-game?

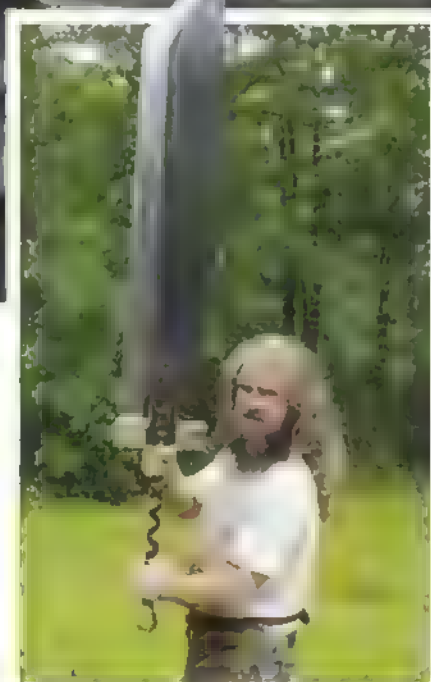
A lot of the older ones I will know, but the modern ones – especially the [swords] from anime – I don't. I usually find wall papers or people who have made HD "Let's Play" videos. It's hard, a lot of people don't even really know what they want if they stop to think about it. Swords will often look different, from the cover art on the box, to the version used in cutscenes, to the model used in the actual game. Animation is even worse; the swords will randomly change size all the time to suit whatever's going on in a scene. I always get the potential customer to send me the first picture or two, just to be positive he or she knows what they want, or at that point it forces them to decide what they really mean when they say, for instance, "the Master Sword."

How long does it take you to create one sword?

It depends on the design. A fairly simple one I can push out in a week, but a super complicated one can take up to two months.

What was the most challenging video game sword you created and why?

Lightning's Gunblade. That one had over 100 parts. I had to split its parts into layers in my head, figure out which parts would have to be joined first, which ones could be joined from



the back, so I could make use of the actual nuts and bolts that were part of the design. There are a couple of nuts and bolts on my sword that aren't actually on the in-game version, but no one has called me on it yet.

If sharpened, could the swords you make stand up in combat or are they more decorative?

The sharpness is not the issue. They are sharp – it's just you humans are too weak to use them. The human frame cannot generate enough momentum to use my swords effectively. Historical swords were typically between 3 and 5 pounds and about 3 feet long. Mine often weigh in over 50 pounds and are around 6 feet long. Due to the design, a lot of them are unbalanced, meaning they were even worse than a historical sword would be scaled up to weighing 50 pounds. When you see a toddler falling to cut wood with an axe, it is not the axe's fault. ♦



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THE TALOS PRINCIPLE

Despite the popularity of Portal, first-person puzzle games are a rare breed. Croteam's philosophizing environmental Rubik's Cube wasn't really on our radar, but once we got our hands on the finished product we were impressed with its overall polish and somber story. To learn more about this interesting indie project we spoke with Croteam CCO and lead game designer Davor Hunski about the The Talos Principle's origin in the Serious Sam franchise, its abundance of story text, and how the team created an A.I. program to beta test their own game. *by Ben Reeves*

Croteam has a history developing the Serious Sam shooter series, so Talos Principle seems like a change of pace for the company. Where did the desire to work on a philosophical puzzle game come from? Most of us in the team are very "science-y" type people. From the dawn of computers, we enjoyed many gaming genres, especially ones that stretch our intellectual boundaries. The first game the team ever made was a puzzle game. And actually, the jammer device in Talos was originally invented to be part of the Serious Sam 4 universe. Back then we created a series of test puzzle levels to show what complexity is appropriate and enjoyable and how long it will take players to solve them. One of our level designers, DavorT, deliberately made very complex puzzles that surpassed what would be appropriate in the Serious Sam universe, but it turned out that our teammates enjoyed these levels the most. So we started thinking what to do with that discovery and tried to brainstorm about further expanding on that field.

I heard that you guys used Lego bricks to prototype some

of the levels. Can you talk about how that worked?

Yes, I stole some Legos from my kids while they were sleeping, and we used them at the beginning to form labyrinths and play around with locations of elements that could make an interesting spatial formation. We used candy as a goal. Once we formed a shape of the puzzle, we used a phone to take photographs from the most exciting designs and re-created them in 3D for user testing. This process liberated us from the time-consuming 3D production pass, allowing us to quickly prototype numerous variations of the same puzzle on logic level. It was almost effortless and enjoyable to try different approaches and completely new variations for the same basic idea.

The game has a lot of puzzles. How did you make sure that none of them felt too similar?

Well, by removing ones that were similar. I am kidding a bit, but we had a pass of puzzle reduction where we cut puzzles that were too easy and felt repetitive. If a puzzle didn't introduce some new concept, then we marked it for removal. We spent quite

some time fine-tuning the difficulty ramp, but we think that we finally found that sweet spot.

Some of the late-game puzzles get pretty complex. How did you playtest to ensure they were all solvable?

We developed an automatic program for testing that all the puzzles are solvable. We call him "The Bot." When any of our team members submitted a change into a database, our automatic build system takes off and creates a new build for that change. When a build is finished, Bot grabs it and starts playing the full game in the same way a player would, but in fast forward – 16 to 32 times faster. If Bot is not able to solve any [part] of the puzzle or his checks discover any anomaly that is not allowed, he immediately reports a bug that is automatically assigned to the developers. This system saved us an unbelievable amount of time and gave us confidence to freely develop and risk certain implementations because we knew that hard-working robot would scream if something broke.

Can you describe a couple of the tools or mechanics that

didn't make it into the game?

We discarded more than a few different mechanics that were not functioning and got rejected in the process. For example, we had a third type of mine, one that tracks you down. Also, we physically built a 3D version of the tetromino arranger out of glued wood pieces, but it was practically impossible to arrange these 3D shapes even using hands in the real world. Although we spent some time and developed some carpentry skills along the way, the idea was rejected in a matter of minutes.

The game is text-heavy. Did you ever worry that that might turn off some players?

Yes, but we designed the game so that people almost don't have to read the texts at all, or could read them in the second playthrough. Some of our internal testers just played the puzzles, skipping the story entirely. We were okay with that. We designed puzzles and game structure in general to be self-fufilling, but it was essential that those who invested into reading and communicating with terminals dug out some real gold. When I felt that both the mechanics and story clicked, I was sure that we had created something special. The best indicator for that was how anxious our team members were for people to get to play our game.

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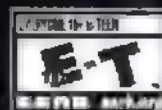
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The Metroid Legacy Continues

by Joe Juba and Matt Müller

Very few games garner such unabashed enthusiasm as the early Metroid games, or the later Castlevania titles that emulated the style of 2D exploration, gated progression, and stylized storytelling. Crowdfunding and the rise of indie development have contributed to a tremendous resurgence of the style, and many of those long-in-development projects are finally nearing a release. This month, we take a closer look at two of the most promising.

First is **Ghost Song**, an atmospheric sci-fi title from developer Old Moon. Gorgeous visuals and eerie music craft a haunting and isolating experience. We played the most recent beta build, and the quality of the gameplay keeps pace with the top-notch presentation.

You assume control of a character who wakes up near a crashed ship on a remote moon. Your identity and your purpose on the moon are mysteries that unfold as the story progresses. In the short term, your goal is to explore — a tempting task given the striking visual design. If you like the beginning of Super Metroid, Ghost Song does not disappoint; the sense of dread and impending danger is ever-present as you explore the caverns and mechanical debris near the crash site.

Mutants, animals, robots, and other hazards lurk beneath the surface, but you are equipped to handle them. You have a basic blaster with a recharging battery, so ammo is technically infinite. However, since the battery depletes with each shot and needs time to fill again, judicious management of your shots is crucial when you are surrounded by foes.

You level up as you defeat enemies, increasing traits like shields and ammo capacity. Along the way, your arsenal grows with

additional special weapons and mobility upgrades like dash and multi-jump. You also acquire a hovering robotic pet that evolves differently depending on the plant life you feed it. As you would expect, many of these improvements allow you to reach areas that were previously inaccessible.

The Metroid influences are apparent, but traces of Dark Souls are also woven into the design. Save points act like bonfires, refilling your health and respawning enemies. From the early section we played, the story is told more through the environment and events than explicit exposition. Plus, Old Moon isn't afraid to hide interesting content in out-of-the-way places, Ash Lake-style. Thankfully, brutal difficulty isn't part of the equation; it's certainly tough, but we found the challenge level rewarding.

Ghost Song is essentially a one-man project undertaken by Matt White, who raised \$54,000 for its development via Kickstarter. PC, Mac, and Linux are currently the only



Looking for more independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates, previews, and reviews. For more in this issue, check out our feature on Cuphead on p. 46, and a wealth of indie games in our look ahead at 2015 (p. 56). You can also read previews of Amplitude (p. 84), That Dragon, Cancer (p. 85), and Kingdom Come: Deliverance (p. 87), and reviews of Life is Strange (p. 93), #IDARB (p. 93) and Hand of Fate (p. 94).

confirmed platforms, though White admits that consoles are never far from his mind. Old Moon recently joined forces with Adult Swim Games as a publisher, so getting *Ghost Song* out to a wider audience is even more likely. Look for it in late 2015.

If *Ghost Song* aims to scratch the sci-fi itch, **Heart Forth, Alicia** should satisfy the fantasy craving. In production for years by developer Alonso Martin, the ambitious project aims to draw on the tight action of games like *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, but with role-playing elements that recall '90s titles like *Xenogears* and *Final Fantasy Tactics*.

The story follows the young wizard Alicia, who is flung from her floating island home by her friend and fellow initiate, who has been possessed by a malevolent spirit. Alicia awakens in the world below, long thought lost to calamity generations ago, and she must confront the problems of that forgotten land while striving to return home to save her friend.

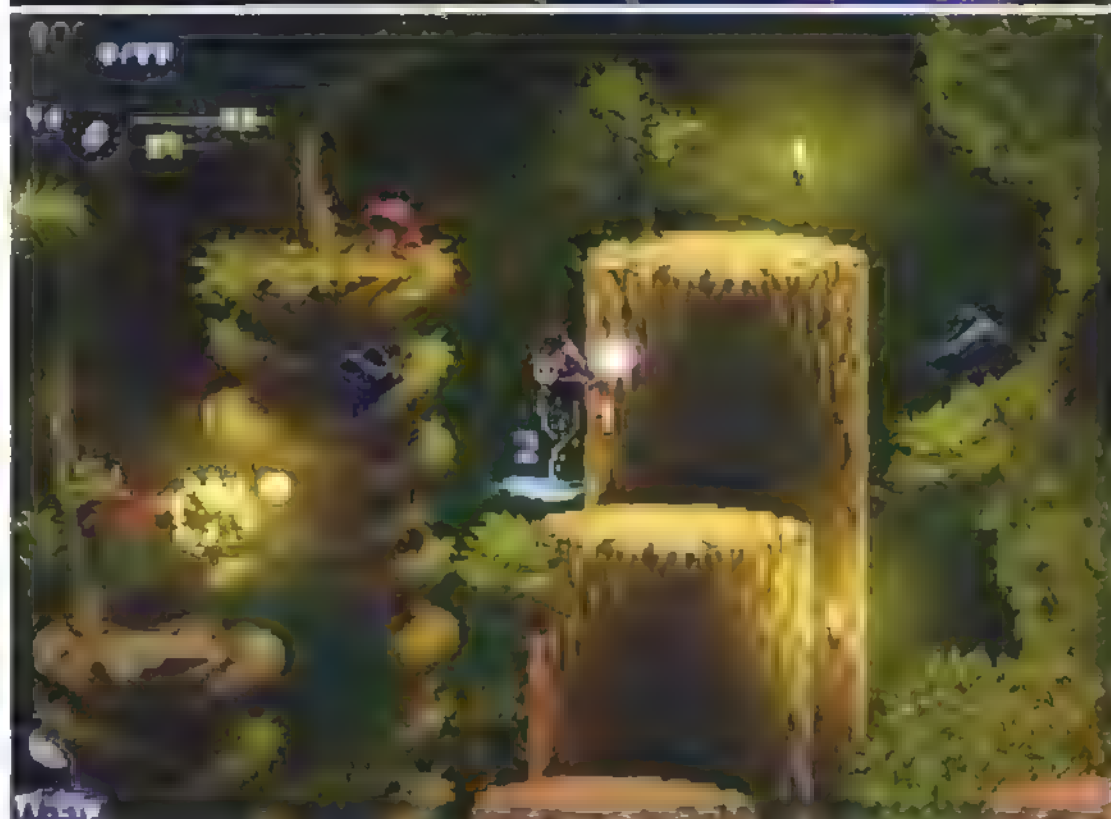
Gameplay sees the pixelated heroine leaping and casting her way through a large 2D world of forests, dungeons, mountains, deserts, and townships. Her primary tool is the Wizard's Lace, an enchanted whip that allows for both melee confrontations and a variety of distance-oriented magic. Spells are often multi-purpose, and can be used as combat tools or to solve progression or obstacle puzzles. Magic can be upgraded for improved effect. Players also juggle various personal stats and accessories, crafting a customized version of Alicia for their preferred play style.

One of the most unusual aspects of the game is the planned integration of live-action video. Early glimpses of the game include cuts to a strange woman who appears to be in the real world. Martin hopes the live-action elements provide a break in the narrative and an intriguing mystery for fans to uncover. Rather than being an extension of Alicia's magical story, the woman is a separate storyline that nonetheless links in some way to the main game.

Thanks to a highly successful Kickstarter, Martin is aiming to release *Heart Forth, Alicia* on an impressive spread of consoles, including PS4, Wii U, Vita, PC, Mac, Linux, and (pending additional funding) 3DS. We're eager to see if the ambition and vision of this fantasy adventure can match reality when *Heart Forth, Alicia* releases near the end of this year. ♦



Heart Forth, Alicia
PS4, Wii U, Vita, PC, Mac, Linux



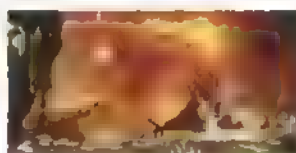
More Variations On The Theme

We received new info this month about *Ghost Song* and *Heart Forth, Alicia*, but several other games in the genre look extremely promising.



Axiom Verge
PS4, Vita, PC

A man named Trace returns from seeming death to explore a haunting world of high technology. *Metroid*-style visuals deliver a heavy dose of nostalgia.



Ori and the Blind Forest
Xbox One, Xbox 360, PC

Breathtaking visuals and taut controls highlight this adventure about a forest's guardian spirit. Ori has been crafted by a multinational team working together from across the world.



A.N.N.E.
PS4, Wii U

You are a tiny robot in a big world, tasked with reassembling your robot love named A.N.N.E. The game mixes platforming action and shoot-em-up mechanics.



Timespinner
PS4, Vita, 3DS, PC, Mac, Linux

Travel through time to bring down an empire in this homage to *Mega Man X* and *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*.



Dinami
PS4, PC, Mac, Linux

Procedurally generated levels help this dungeon-crawling exploration game stand out from the crowd. You play a young soldier uncovering the mystery of a town sealed off from the rest of the world.

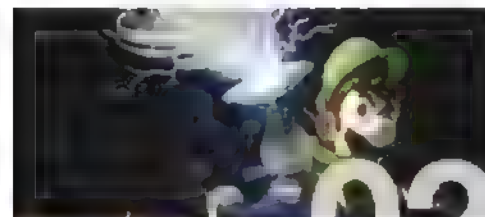
Vacuums

by Tim Turi



Kirby

Contrary to popular belief, this adorable cream puff isn't named after the vacuum-cleaner line of the same name. Yet, his mighty lung capacity is the first thing we thought of when beginning this list. Not only can Kirby inhale or consume almost any enemy in Dreamland, he can also disturbingly digest them in a flash and steal their abilities. Kirby is the cutest little nightmare.



Poltergust 5000 - Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon

Luigi has been busting ghosts with this souped-up cleaner since his GameCube days. The timid plumber relies on the Poltergust's suction power to suck up ghosts that've been stunned by his flashlight. Even better, the improvements of the 5000 model allow him to pick up objects like flaming balls that he can blast at objects like nasty cobwebs.



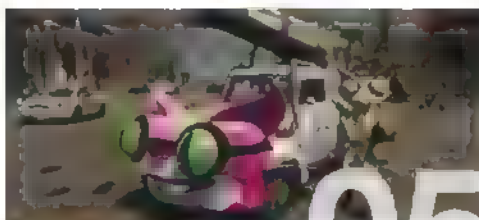
Dust Man - Mega Man IV

Most of the entries on this list are either characters that act like vacuums, or actual machines. Dust Man is both. This unfortunately named Robot Master intakes air at such a high velocity that it actually forces Mega Man to run in the opposite direction. Naturally, the Blue Bomber can steal Dust Man's detritus-blasting "power," but why would he want to?



Exsanguinator - Dead Rising 2

In the Dead Rising series, if you can pick it up you can kill a zombie with it. Sure, Chuck Greene *could* bludgeon the undead to death with a standard vac, but the DIY master makes the job faster and messier by attaching some wicked saw blades. Once crafted, the Exsanguinator chews zombies in half and scatters their bloody bits like that scene from *Fargo*.



Genki Manapult - Saints Row: The Third

Professor Genki is a maniacal game-show host with a cat head who fancies himself an inventor. One such impractical toy is the Manapult, a truck that sucks up crowds of civilians on the streets and loads them into a roof-mounted cannon. The inhaled pedestrians are then launched as projectiles, complete with confetti and a rousing march fanfare.



Space

The Final Frontier is just a big, black vacuum of nothingness stretching in every direction for infinity. The unfeeling vastness of the universe often plays a key role in sci-fi games. Isaac Clarke is frequently choked out when space steals his oxygen, and the hungry Hoover that is the universe also plays a pivotal part in the climax of *Portal 2*.



Vac-U 4000

Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One

Insomniac's beloved sci-fi action-platformer is home to tons of zany weaponry that shoot unlikely ammo like disco balls or snowballs. The Vac-U turns Ratchet and his crew into projectiles themselves. Letting your friends suck you up and blast you toward an unreachable ledge instead of off a cliff is a powerful trust exercise.



Raziel

Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver

Everyone has experienced hunger so ravenous that they've inhaled an entire pizza or tube of cookie dough. Raziel is always like that, except he's a wraith who has an unquenchable thirst for souls. This ghoul doesn't even have a jaw, allowing him to pull down his stylish scarf and scarf down the delicious souls of his fallen foes.



King Dodongo

The Legend of Zelda Series

This giant lizard's most powerful strength is also his greatest weakness. In addition to rolling around the battlefield, the boss also sucks up a bunch of air before he breathes fire at our green-garbed hero. Unfortunately, he's too blinded by his rage to notice Link tossing a lit bomb toward his gaping maw.



Blinx: The Time Sweeper

Microsoft's failed mascot wouldn't have made this list, except for the fact that the schlub has a vacuum. This custodian of time and space is responsible for correcting inter-dimensional anomalies by manipulating time and blasting enemies with garbage. He sucks up with his vacuum. The appliance also comes in handy for cleaning up all that damned cat hair.

The Good



SID MEIER AND FIRAXIS have announced Sid Meier's Starships, a turn-based galactic strategy title for PC, Mac, and iPad featuring cross-connectivity with Civilization: Beyond Earth. Players command a fleet of starships, and in classic Meier fashion, they will build a planetary federation through tech trees, war, and influence. At the time of this writing, Starships is expected to come out early this year.



The Bad

NINTENDO'S New 3DS XL does not come with a power adapter. Granted, you can use the charger from your 3DS, but if you don't own that handheld, getting one for the 3DS XL will cost you about \$10.

The Ugly

HOTLINE MIAMI 2

has been denied classification from Australia's ratings board—effectively banning the title in the country. The game features scenes containing implied sexual violence (including one in the opening sequence as part of a movie being filmed) that players can choose to skip from the beginning of the game.

Publisher Devolver Digital said that the classification board described some specific actions that are not in the game in a "stretch" of the facts and that developer Dennaton Games does not plan to alter and/or resubmit the title.

Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number designer Jonatan Söderström has told Australian fans to "just pirate" the title if it isn't released in Australia.



Quotable

"While we're busy working on software for the Wii U, we have production lines that are working on ideas for what the next system might be."



Shigeru Miyamoto tells the Associated Press about Nintendo's next hardware move.



A New Approach

Born from the ashes of Gamecock, Devolver Digital has evolved into a digital-age game publisher, working with some of the world's most respected independent developers. We recently spoke with Devolver co-founder **Nigel Lowrie** about the company's unconventional approach.

interview by **Matt Helgeson**

The conventional wisdom was that in the new digital economy, game publishers like Devolver wouldn't be necessary – the developer could go straight to the audience. Yet, you seem to be thriving. What is the role of the publisher in the digital age? We tell our developers, most of whom are very small, that nobody needs a publisher. We want to be straight up with them. What publishers have become is a partner. We use our relationships – with PR, the press, PlayStation, and industry events – to do what you could have done on your own, letting you focus on making your game. That's what our developers really want; lots of them don't even really need money. A lot of them are really savvy at marketing, too. But they need someone they trust to do that for them because the time they spend coming up with marketing plans, putting together trailers and assets, scheduling interviews and events – that's time that's taken away from them working on the game.

We do anything and everything that needs to be done. It's up to them to tell us what they want. With a recently announced game, when it comes to the game itself, our team plays it and provides feedback. They can take that feedback and implement changes or tell us to f-off. It's up to them.

With Titan Souls, we're taking the next build and sending it to all the developers we work with – 30 or 40 people – and they'll play it and provide feedback. And, if they want a public or private beta, we'll handle that as well. The final thing we handle is QA testing – the nitty gritty testing. We work with the testing studios, we handle the localization. We have a suite of services. It's up to the developer to tell us what they want us to be a part of and what they don't.

Do you actually invest in or fund some of the games?

Absolutely. Things like Shadow Warrior and The Talos Principle, two recent games, are larger-scale investments. We've also helped fund smaller games like Luftrausers and Hotline Miami. That usually means we're paying for things like living expenses, licenses, and hardware. They all work from home like us, but we fund them for the year or however long it takes.

Looking at Devolver's portfolio, outside of Steam, it seems like more of your games come out on PlayStation 4 rather than Xbox One. Is PlayStation 4 a better platform for indie developers right now?

From an indie standpoint, the teams at PlayStation in America and Europe have done a good job of positioning their console as a welcoming destination for indie games.

A lot of the people we've worked with usually have spoken to us and Sony. Sony went and found them – the same way I will hear about a game and go pursue the developer. I don't know if Microsoft has done that or not, but anecdotally, a lot of the people we work with get a lot of support and admiration from Sony. Sony treats us the same way as they treat the developers; they reach out to us and want to know what games we have coming. When you get that support and promotion and open arms, it's hard to say no. Right now, PlayStation seems to be the most welcoming platform for indies.

On multiplatform releases, are the Steam versions generally the biggest sellers? When it comes to our games, which are smaller and indie, I'd say between 75 and 95 percent of the revenue those games generate comes from Steam. A lot of our games were built with PC in mind. So they come out there first, which has a lot to do with it. Also, the openness of the PC platform – especially being able to share an early version of the game and build a community – helps a lot. And, Steam is a fantastic platform for distributing digitally, as perfect as you could get right now.

How do you decide which games you are going to work with and put your stamp on? We're looking for something that takes a bit of a risk. There may be something familiar about it; it may be a first person shooter or an RPG. But there's something intangible you look at and say, "This is doing something different." It may be avant garde or risky, and not for everyone. That's okay. In our business model, that can work. It's something that's not afraid to step out on that cliff, because we'll go out there with them. So far, it's worked well, because I think the gamers in our audience are looking for that.

The big thing for us is finding developers with passion. They would have done this with or without us – and with or without financial success. What we are able to say is that there is a commercial viability for this, identify that, and help them get that game out to the people who really need to know about it.

What's your feeling about the mobile space? The market seems more difficult for creative games that aren't free-to-play and based on microtransactions. That's something I wish I knew the answer to. It is hard when you look at the top games on iOS – it is the Clash of Clans and Candy Crushes. People enjoy those, and there's nothing wrong with that. But I don't want to produce those because that's not what I enjoy. That said, there are people doing very creative, art-driven games like Monument Valley and like Threes! that are a cut above anything you could find in free-to-play. As good as those games can be, they'll get

promoted in the stores, but they don't end up on the top of the charts. Also, because of the nature of those stores, they also get ripped off pretty quickly. It's harder to break through and make a financial success from critical success.

I worry about the expectations that the mobile business is building in the audience in terms of expecting everything to be free. Things like subscription services and free-to-play games in general aren't a bad thing, but they certainly encourage the consumer to think differently. You have to show why your game has value. It hurts me deep in my heart when I see those things happen. We'll put out a game on Steam for \$10 and it will be loved by everyone, but you'll see that one review that says, "Why isn't this game free?" or "Why is this game \$20? It should be \$1." It's the devaluation, not of games, but the effort that's put into them. To look forward from a business perspective, there's a whole generation coming up that doesn't play PC games except Minecraft and do not play consoles. They play on iPad and everything for free. They are going to grow up thinking games are free, just like there are people who have grown up thinking music should be free because they could get it for free.

Is there one game in particular that you're proud of making happen – one that you think wouldn't have happened without Devolver? I would say that Always Sometimes Monsters is one of my proudest moments for us as a group. There were two gentlemen that worked on that game, Justin Amirkhani and Jake Reardon. Justin used to be in games media and did freelance work. At one point, he hitchhiked around the country meeting with people in games and writing a blog about it. He got in contact with me. We had jaapeno vodka in Austin at a bar I like and talked about video games. It was great.

He said, "I have an idea for a game, but I'm going to tell you later." A couple years later at GDC, he came up to me and said, "I want to meet with you." So we met with Justin, sitting on the floor outside a men's room, and he pitched us this game – "It's an old school RPG with pixel art, no combat, and it's about everyday life." He wanted to make a game where your life has been crushed and you have to live out that harsh reality.

He needed money and support to do it. It was not an insubstantial amount of money for a small company like us. We told them, "This game might not be a financial success, but what it's doing is important and it's daring and we want to make this happen." And we did. The game came out and it reviewed very well and sold very well – it was a financial success. I don't believe it would have done that without our help. ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1986 CLUB NINTENDO
Gets a Nintendo Entertainment System and begins a lifelong love affair with video games

2002 HIGHER LEARNING
Graduates from Southern Methodist University, where he focused on advertising and marketing

2002 THE WORKING WORLD
Begins work in the advertising industry in Dallas, Texas, where he conducts campaigns for companies like Nestle and 7-Eleven

2008 THE BIG MOVE
Wanting a career in games, Lowrie searches online for game publishers in Texas, and eventually lands a gig with Gamecock in Austin. He works on the game Velvet Assassin

2008 TOUGH TIMES
After only eight months, Gamecock's investors pull out and the company goes under. Lowrie proposes to his girlfriend on his last day at the company

2009 RISE AGAIN
Along with Mike Wilson, Graeme Struthers, and Rich Stults, Lowrie founds the startup Devolver Digital to work on Croteam's upcoming Serious Sam 3 and Serious Sam HD projects

2011 BACK IN BUSINESS
Serious Sam 3 is released, along with a trio of smaller Serious Sam games created by indie developers

2012 GOING SMALL
Now focusing on the emerging, digitally distributed indie game market, Devolver helps fund and release the critically acclaimed Hotline Miami

2014 CRITICAL ACCLAIM
Devolver has a blockbuster year with games like Always Sometimes Monsters, Luftrausers, OlliOlli, and The Talos Principle

gear



N

the new 3DS XL is the most powerful handheld console ever made. It features a new 3D effect that doesn't require glasses, a new motion control system, and a new set of games. It's the perfect way to enjoy the Nintendo 3DS experience.

at Best Buy

The new Infrared LED sensor facilitates face tracking for better 3D effects

Volume control moved from the base segment

The new NFC reader is under the lower screen

The new z triggers

The game slot moved from the back

The headphone jack moved from the left side

The power button moved from the face of the device to the outer edge

The new c stick

Start/select moved from below the lower screen

The cameras take better low light photos

The physical wi fi button has been replaced with a toggle in the software

The new microSD card slot is hidden under the back panel

The glossy outer plastic shows finger prints, unlike the original 3DS XL's matte finish

Launch Models

- New Black
- The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask Edition
- New Red
- Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate bundle (includes game) - \$229.99

Stats

- **Height:** 93.5mm (Original 3DS XL: 93mm)
- **Width:** 160mm (Original 156mm)
- **Depth:** 21.5mm (Original 22mm)
- **Weight:** 329 grams (Original 336 grams)
- **Upper screen size (diagonal):** 4.88" (Unchanged)
- **Lower screen size (diagonal):** 4.18" (Unchanged)
- **Battery Life:** 3.5 to 7 hours when using Nintendo 3DS software (Original range: 3.5 to 6.5 hours)
- **Stylus:** 3 3/8" long, approx. 1/4" thick (Original 3 7/8" long, approx. 3/16" thick)

Resolution Ratings

The New 3DS XL's pixel density remains unchanged from previous models. See how it compares to other common devices at similar screen sizes

- **iPhone 1 (2007):** 163 ppi
- **iPhone 4 (2007):** 326 ppi
- **Nexus One (2010):** 254 ppi
- **Vita (2012):** 220 ppi
- **Nexus 6 (2014):** 493 ppi
- **iPhone 6 Plus (2014):** 401 ppi
- **New 3DS XL (2015):** 96 ppi

If you're staunchly anti 3D no matter what, there's still plenty to enjoy. A more powerful CPU means that navigating apps feels snappier and games load faster (Super Smash Bros. loads in 14 seconds compared to 32 seconds on the normal XL). Even downloads pick up the pace, with the YouTube app taking 38 seconds to receive on our office wi fi versus 74 seconds. Outside of loads, no current games take advantage of the new power, but Xenoblade Chronicles 3D will be the first to do so in April. It's strange that Nintendo is releasing the system without this exclusive game so we have no way to see its true potential.

A new c-stick adds long-needed right stick control to the 3DS alongside extra shoulder buttons (both previously only available as a bulky add-on). The small nub handles camera

controls and aiming in a handful of supported legacy games and unleashes smash attacks in Smash Bros. It does the job for camera movement, but for fine aiming I had to lower the sensitivity. Future supported games should offer highly customizable control schemes so you're not stuck using the tiny new z triggers for aiming and shooting like in Resident Evil: Revelations.

Added NFC tech means Nintendo's hit Amibos are finally supported on 3DS. Super Smash Bros. is the only game to use it out of the gate with the same features as the Wii U edition. Code Name: S.T.E.A.M. joins on March 13 supporting several Fire Emblem characters. While Amibos aren't taking over 3DS just yet, there's no doubt they're becoming a bigger part of Nintendo's strategy going forward.

It's not all good news, however. Surprisingly, the New 3DS doesn't include an AC adapter. Also, storage has changed from SD on previous models to microSD, so customers needing more than 4 GB of storage will have to buy a new card. You'll also need a tiny screwdriver (#0) to access the card locked under the back panel instead of an easily accessible side slot. These minor annoyances can be overcome, but the unimproved, painfully poor screen resolution can't. The imagery looks completely outdated compared to what you're used to seeing every day on phones, tablets, and monitors with at least triple the pixel density. While this is the best 3DS yet, these flaws hold it back from being a must-buy reinvention.

VERY GOOD

\$199 | nintendo.com/3ds

The Unrelenting March Toward Always-Online



by Jeff Marchiafava

A

week after E3 2013, gamers celebrated what they considered a decisive victory, as Microsoft dropped its much-maligned always-online plans for the Xbox One. The policy reversal, along with Sony's chest-beating embrace of offline support for the PlayStation 4, assured gamers that they could look forward to another generation of playing games when and how they wanted to. However, the recent and prolonged network outages for both systems during the holidays have placed the consumer-driven triumph in its proper – albeit depressing – context; gamers may have won the opening battle against always-online, but we're losing the war.

To give credit where credit is due, Microsoft and Sony both responded to the impassioned (and at times invective) pleas of gamers and have stayed true to their word: The PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, once properly updated, are capable of playing games offline. That hasn't stopped publishers from finding a new, more appeasable way of skinning the proverbial cat, however. Now, many publishers have their own cross-game online service, and they all come bearing gifts. Official game websites chronicle your exploits with a cornucopia of stats. Jumping through registration hoops rewards you with exclusive in-game goodies. Mobile apps keep you connected to your games even when you're not playing them. Make no mistake, these freebies do have a price: They've been inching us toward the always-online playing field gamers have been resisting.

The end of 2014 served as a serious wake-up call. During the holidays, both Microsoft and Sony suffered DDoS attacks that crippled their online services for days, rendering online-only games like *Destiny* completely unplayable during the outage. However, a surprising number of single-player and (supposedly) offline games were affected as well. Games like *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and *Far Cry 4* start by logging in to EA and Ubisoft's respective servers, a superfluous yet somehow mandatory step even if you're playing the game solo. There are no in-game options to cancel or skip the sign-in process, and no indication that the games will eventually start up offline after the defunct servers time out. Some gamers discovered that this lengthy wait could be bypassed by manually unplugging your console from the Internet, but that information is never conveyed to the consumer, and the ambiguity of the situation is a little disconcerting; despite being predominantly single-player experiences, games like *Inquisition* and *Far Cry 4* are built to be played online, and little care is paid to what happens when you don't have a connection to the publishers' services. Did EA and Ubisoft seriously never consider the possibility that their servers or the larger networks their games depend upon might go down at some point?

This slow (and some might say sly) creep of online dependency is already leaving people behind. Rarely does a month go by when we don't receive letters from readers opining the state of gaming in rural areas where high-speed Internet isn't available. There are no good answers for these unlucky players; this generation of games is simply going to be less fun – and, thanks to the increased reliance on post-release patches, increasingly broken – without access to the online world. But this holiday season's outages proved you don't have to live in the boonies to be affected, and gave many an empathetic glimpse into the lives of unplugged players. Without the ability to download mandatory system updates, countless gamers opened up shiny new nonfunctioning consoles on Christmas morning – a colossal disappointment that might just make you wonder if you were actually on Santa's naughty list.

For those who are connected, accepting our increasingly always-online world would be a more palatable proposition if its biggest proponents weren't so damned inept at delivering on their vision. Despite 2011's 23-day service outage and the fact that Sony now charges consumers for online play, the company's PlayStation Network is still painfully vulnerable to outside attacks. Xbox Live – which Microsoft has always charged consumers for – didn't fare any better during the holidays, and both companies were slow to provide updates to their consumers or explain what was happening behind the scenes (the full story of which we'll likely never hear).

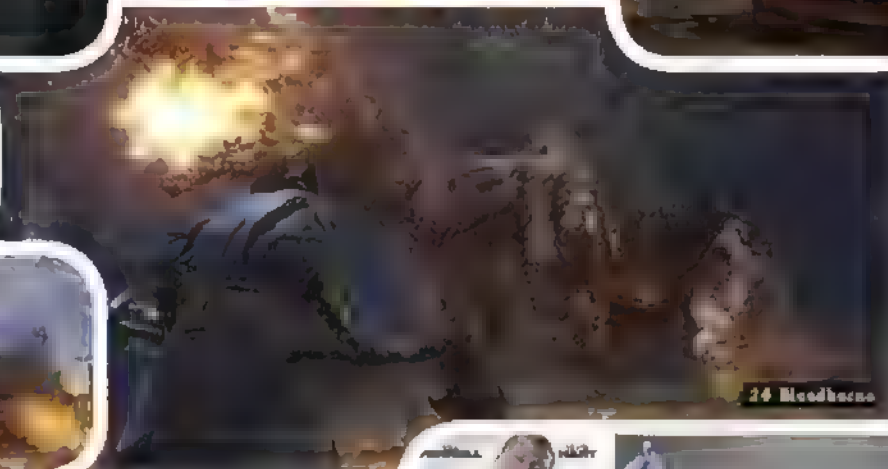
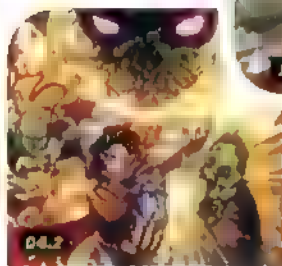
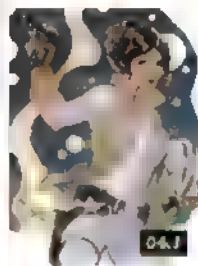
Above and beyond Sony and Microsoft's continued and embarrassing inability to stop mischievous hackers from bringing down their online services for lulz, 2014 was plagued by facepalm-worthy server problems. Even some of the biggest and most established series like *Halo* and *World of Warcraft* couldn't get things right. If this is the future publishers are trying to sell us on, is it any wonder that gamers aren't buying it?

The unrelenting march towards always-online gaming isn't going to stop. As a global community, we are becoming more connected, and more dependent on our connections. Video games are on the front line of our ever-advancing technology, as they should be; part of what makes gaming so exciting is the breakneck speed at which our experiences continue to improve and evolve. I'm glad game companies have realized they can attract more flies with honey than vinegar, but I'd like to suggest a few more ingredients to entice begrudging gamers with as we head toward our inevitable always-online future: transparency, reliability, and a better back-up plan for playing our games the next time we find ourselves unexpectedly unplugged. ♦

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer or its staff.

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If you work in the industry and would like to share your opinion, contact senior features editor Matt Helgeson at matt@gamemag.com.



02 GDC 2015

San Francisco's Game Developers Conference has long been one of the best shows for speakers, panels, and learning why games are built certain ways. This year's show is no exception. The talks include Mark DeLoura's "A View From the White House," Ubisoft and Avalanche teaming up to discuss "Realizing Relaxed Behaviors in Triple-A Games," and "How to Make and Self-Publish a Game in 12 Months" by SomaSim's Matthew Vigliani.

03 New Releases

- Bladestorm: Nightmare (PS4, Xbox One, PS3)
- Resident Evil: Revelations 2 — Episode 2 (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)
- Screamride (Xbox One, 360)

04.1 Filling in Star Wars' Gaps

Marvel Comics' million-selling Star Wars comic book series continues this month with a story that focuses on Princess Leia's actions in the wake of the destruction of the Death Star. This *Princess Leia* limited series is penned by comic book legend Mark Waid with art by the great Terry Dodson.

04.2 DC Comics' Summer Event

In the wake of Multiversity, DC Comics is beginning the next phase for its universe of heroes in a series called *Convergence*. DC calls it "the biggest story in DC history," and

says it will tie in to "literally every DC story ever told." Issue zero of *Convergence* ships today.

05 PAX East

Held in Boston, MA, Penny Arcade's eastern Expo kicks off today and runs through the weekend. Showgoers can expect to get their hands on plenty of new games, many of which fall into a sizable indie showcase. As of this writing, no speakers or panels have been announced.

06.1 Louisville Arcade Expo 2015

If you're looking for a weekend filled with classic gaming and pinball, the Louisville Arcade Expo looks to cater to your every whim. This show offers over 100 pinball and arcade machines (all set to free play), tournaments, a cosplay contest, and kids 10 and under get in free with an adult.

06.2 New Releases

- Atelier Shallie: Alchemists of the Dusk Sea (PS3)
- DmC: Devil May Cry — Definitive Edition (PS4, Xbox One)
- Ori and the Blind Forest (Xbox One)
- Resident Evil: Revelations 2 — Episode 3 (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)
- Tokyo Twilight Ghosthunters (PS3, Vita)

06.3 New Releases

- Code Name: S.T.E.A.M. (3DS)

13.2 SXSW Gaming Expo 2015

The video game content at this year's South by Southwest in Austin, TX, is anchored by a bevy of panels that discuss everything from Minecraft to whether or not there's a future in games between indie and Triple-A. Several publishers are also showing off upcoming games, and there are a number of workshops to get involved with.

17 New Releases

- The Awakened Fate Ultimatum (PS3)
- Battlefield: Hardline (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)
- Final Fantasy Type-0 HD (PS4, Xbox One)
- Project CARS (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Resident Evil: Revelations 2 — Episode 4 (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)

19 Eve Online Fanfest 2015

The rabid fan base for Eve Online is once again invited to Iceland to

meet up with fellow players, and more importantly, party. The events include roundtable discussions, a party at the top of the world, and a hangover party in the Blue Lagoon. The fun starts today and runs through March 21.

20 Jump Around

Theatergoers are invited to watch a bunch of homeless youths jump across rooftops for the second time in *Insurgent*, opening today. It's the sequel to *Divergent*, which was about a group of homeless kids who were still developing their jumping skills. There's a story behind all of this — something about politics or virtues — but the real focus is on kids doing bad ass things, we think.

24 New Releases

- Bloodborne (PS4)
- Borderlands: The Handsome Collection (PS4, Xbox One)
- Grand Theft Auto V (PC)

27 Will Ferrell and Robots

Two noteworthy releases hit

theaters today. *Get Hard* stars Will Ferrell and Kevin Hart, and *Chappie* is basically a *Short Circuit* reboot from the director of *District 9*. You must decide if you want to watch Will Ferrell make fun of prison life or a robot likely die a horrible death. You know it's going to die. They make you fall in love with it, and then murder it. Hollywood writers are the worst.

07 GillickCon 2015

The Game Informer crew is involved in this year's GillickCon in Minneapolis, delivering a live Replay recording of the cult classic game *Overblood* on March 28, and a panel that discusses the state of gaming on the following day. A wide variety of speakers and events are also a part of this year's show.

07 New Releases

- MLB 15: The Show (PS4, PS3, Vita)

2015



RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER



CALL OF THE WILD

TEMPERED BY TRAGEDY,
LARA CROFT HAS GROWN
INTO AN EXPERIENCED
TREASURE SEEKER.
NOW SHE'S HOT ON THE
HUNT FOR THE SECRET OF
IMMORTALITY IN ONE OF
THE COLDEST PLACES
ON EARTH

■ PLATFORM
Xbox One • Xbox 360

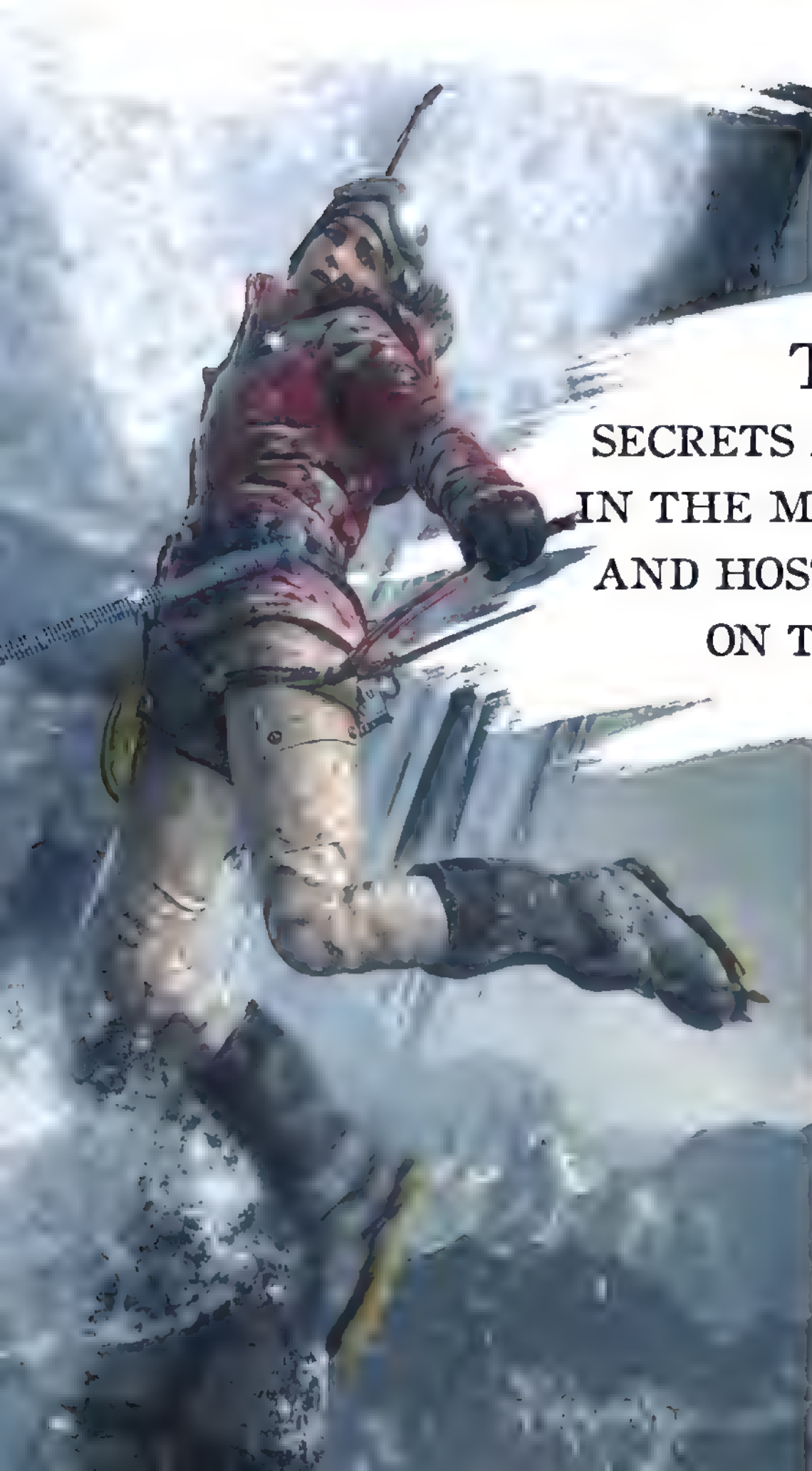
■ STYLE
1-Player Action

■ PUBLISHER
Square Enix

■ DEVELOPER
Crystal Dynamics

■ RELEASE
Holiday

ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY



THE WORLD'S SECRETS ARE HIDDEN IN THE MOST REMOTE AND HOSTILE PLACES ON THE PLANET.

If they weren't, we wouldn't need people like Lara Croft to find them. Lara's previous journey taught her how to adapt – how to fight for her own survival. But in Lara's next outing, the globetrotter is no longer reacting to imminent danger; she is actively throwing herself into a series of harrowing situations, putting her life and credibility on the line as she faces off against a secret society in the forgotten corners of the world. Everything that came before has been a training ground for this journey. Lara is about to embark on her first real tomb-raiding expedition.



Hub areas in *Rise of the Tomb Raider* are two to three times bigger than they were in the reboot

GOING TO THE TOP AND FLOWING

The *Tomb Raider* series needed to change. By the mid 2000s, the once-iconic video game franchise started to slump. On course to deliver the same exaggerated platforming sequences and lock-on shootouts year after year, *Tomb Raider*'s graphics looked modern, but its gameplay and sexy heroine were still rooted in 1996.

After releasing *Tomb Raider*:

Underworld in 2008, Crystal Dynamics held meetings intended to address *Tomb Raider*'s middling success with a series of dramatic design changes. However, it wasn't long before the studio realized *Tomb Raider* needed a complete reboot. Throughout that iterative process, Crystal Dynamics experimented with turning *Tomb Raider* into a horror franchise, played

with *Shadow of the Colossus*-inspired horseback riding, and even temporarily gave Lara a monkey companion before settling on a more grounded and brutal story of survival.

Lara Croft became a young archeology graduate who narrowly survived a shipwreck only to find herself on a mysterious island called Yamatai located within the uncontrollably savage Dragon's Triangle

off the coast of Japan. Not only was Lara forced to survive the dangers of an unforgiving wilderness, she also fended off assaults from criminals, mercenaries, and other shipwreck survivors who had formed a vicious sun-worshipping cult.

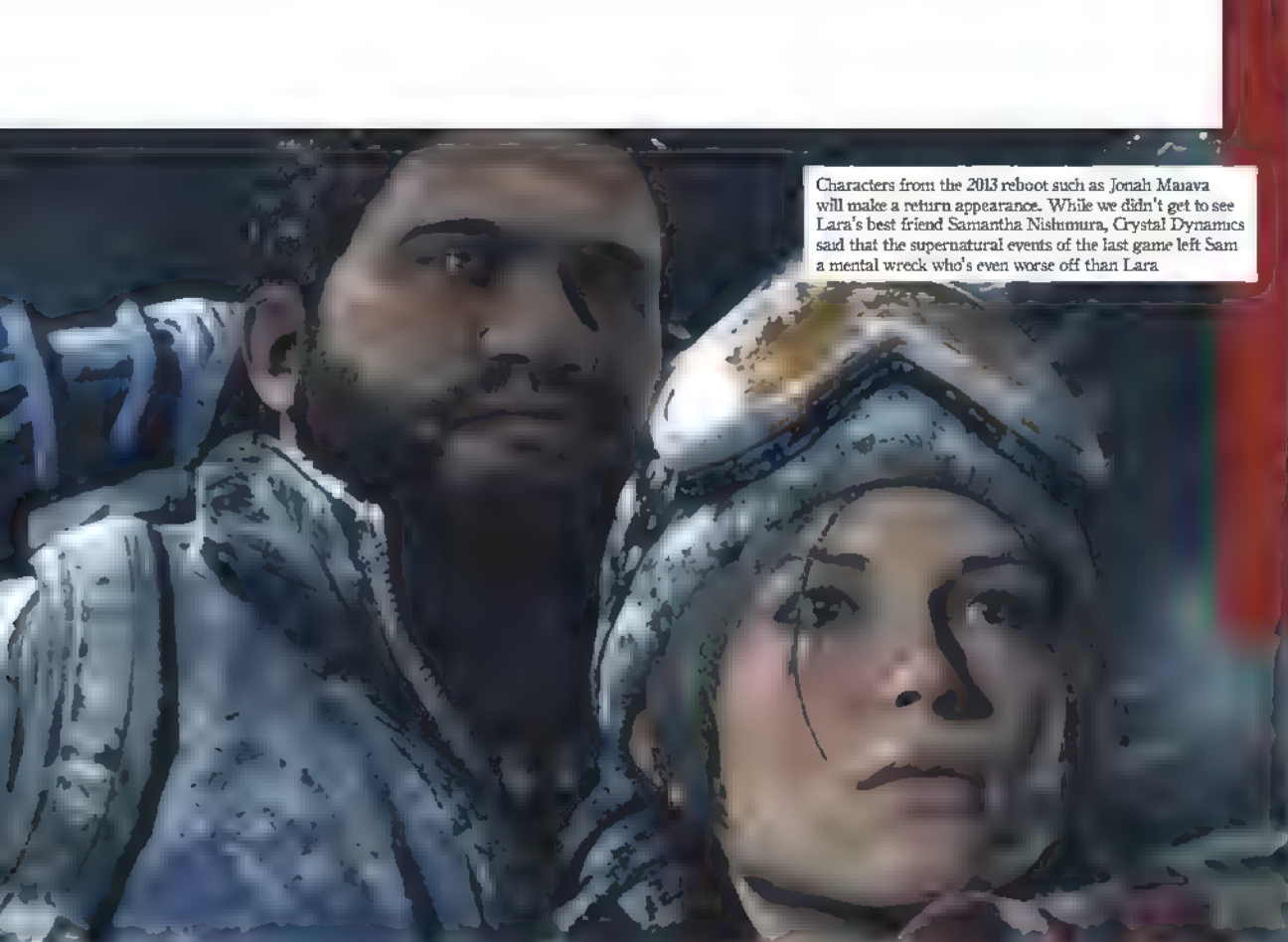
"The project was definitely a bit of a gamble," says franchise creative director Noah Hughes. "I was amazed at how onboard everybody was in pre-production, even when we didn't have the answers yet. We had a franchise that was among the most recognizable in gaming, and people wanted it to feel like a fresh and modern offering again. There was a lot of stress with that; a lot of anxiousness to see where we would end up."

When *Tomb Raider* released in 2013, it was critically lauded for its emotionally charged journey, thrilling set-piece moments, and polished gameplay. Square Enix sold more than one million copies of *Tomb Raider* in less than 48 hours, and the game has shipped more than seven million copies to date.

But that success wasn't without its cost. Several members of the team burned out during the last stretch of development, working 18-hour days for nearly a year. The needs of a top-tier video game forced its developer to sacrifice personal hobbies, friendships, and time with family. Through that pain and sacrifice, however, Crystal Dynamics delivered the best *Tomb Raider* to date. Now, they just have to do it again.



Crystal Dynamics promises that tombs will have a larger role this time around



Characters from the 2013 reboot such as Jonah Maava will make a return appearance. While we didn't get to see Lara's best friend Samantha Nishimura, Crystal Dynamics said that the supernatural events of the last game left Sam a mental wreck who's even worse off than Lara.

CHARACTER

Lara carries the scars of Yamatai with her wherever she goes. Her new character model literally reflects battle wounds she received during the last game, but many of Lara's scars are actually psychological. When Crystal Dynamics revealed *Rise of the Tomb Raider* last year during Microsoft's E3 press conference, it showed a trailer of Lara flopping on a therapist's couch. This scene won't necessarily appear in the game, but it is an accurate representation of Lara's psychological state. On Yamatai, Lara experienced things that still haunt her — she was forced to kill in order to protect herself and her loved ones, and that kind

of ordeal makes it hard to reintegrate back into normal society.

"She's being called crazy as much as she is crazy," says Hughes. "People think she's crazier than she is. If you came back and started talking about an immortal being and a secret sun-worshipping cult, that's a tough pill to swallow. So Lara feels like an outsider in the real world. Her next expedition is a way of dealing with the trauma she's been through, but it's also a way of finding peace by chasing any shred of evidence that what she saw was real."

On Yamatai, Lara saw something that she'll never forget, something that might

easily drive someone crazy: an immortal soul. Lara saw a creature that had been alive for centuries, and she believes a discovery like that deserves to be studied more closely. Lara spends the year after Yamatai researching immortality myths — desperately trying to find some shred of evidence that lines up with what she saw. It doesn't take her long to stumble across the legend of the invincible city of Kitezh.

As the legend goes, back in the early 13th century, the Grand Prince of Vladimir built an enlightened city deep in the frozen wilds of what is now Russia. Decades later, when an invading Mongolian army marched against the walls of the city, the army was surprised to find it had no military fortifications of any kind. Instead, many of Kitezh's townsfolk were quietly praying in the streets for salvation. Before the Mongolian army could even set foot in the town, it began to sink into a nearby lake, taking all of its treasures and secrets into the depths below.

RAISING THE STAKES

Icy winds howl over frosted peaks as Lara Croft trudges through knee-high snow. A year's worth of planning has brought her to the glacial cliffs of Siberia. At her side stands Jonah Maava, whom fans of the last game will recognize as the affable cook of the *Endurance* before it crashed on Yamatai's shores.

JUMPING BACK A GENERATION

Some might be surprised to hear that Square Enix plans to release *Rise of the Tomb Raider* on both Xbox One and Xbox 360, but Crystal Dynamics says it is sure that work on the 360 version won't limit the studio's development of the Xbox One version. In fact, an entirely different studio, Nixxes Software, is handling the 360 port.

"We're wholly focused on *Rise* being an Xbox One title without limitation, without even thinking of the Xbox 360 version," says head of western studios Darrell Gallagher. "At the same time, the Xbox 360's ecosystem is still super strong. There are millions of players out there who have an Xbox 360 and those console translations take time. So we did a test. Nixxes put together a tech demo of *Rise of the Tomb Raider* content running on the 360, and we were totally blown away by what they achieved. But the existence of that game isn't limiting our work on the Xbox One version."

Jonah is one of Lara's few fellow survivors, and has remained loyal to her in spite of her almost suicidal need to push herself past her limits.

However, unlike Lara's last adventure, where she had to scrape and scavenge for all her equipment, she is now outfitted for the trek ahead. As they approach the summit, Lara withdraws two climbing axes and begins her ascent up the ice sheet. The gaze beneath her shudders and gives way before sending her into a freefall. Fortunately, Jonah tightens the slack on her line and assists in swinging her over a gap, where she regains purchase. It was



SAY IT AIN'T SNOW

Tomb Raider has always been known for its globetrotting adventures, but in the reboot, Crystal Dynamics pinned Lara Croft to one location for an entire game. The studio received a few complaints from fans on this point, and promises that *Rise of the Tomb Raider* will take Lara to at least two different locations across the globe. And while the studio isn't ready to reveal the coordinates of that second location just yet, it has promised an even greater breadth of terrain across its locales. This means that Lara won't be trudging through snow the whole time she's in Siberia. During our demo, we got a brief glimpse of dusty sandscapes, dense forests, and underwater caverns.

a close call, the first of many.

Jonah makes it to the top of the mountain first and yells out, "Lara, wait 'til you see this view."

As Lara mantles over an icy knife edge, she is treated to a splendid panorama of azure mountains. In the distance she can see a golden city nestled in the foothills.

Suddenly, the sky crackles and an ominous wave of black rolls over the mountainside. The wind picks up.

"Storm's getting closer, we have a couple hours at most," Jonah yells through the squalor.

Lara's not worried; she's determined - and she's closer than ever to answers. Unfortunately, strong winds

and subzero temperatures aren't the only thing Lara and Jonah have to worry about. As the two begin their descent towards the ruins, the mountain shivers. It sounds as if the stones themselves have cracked in half, and a moment later a tidal wave of snow comes barreling towards the explorers.

In a flash, Lara takes off. Bounding over a gap in the ice, Lara scrambles across creaky wooden walkways. During the chaos, Lara loses sight of Jonah. She doesn't have time to go back; she dashes forward just out of reach of the churning snow. Lara passes by the wreck of an old airliner

and uses a discarded cable to zip line over a large chasm. She's in a race with the snow. And she loses.

The roiling snow catches up with Lara and sends her tumbling down the side of a cliff. Fortunately, Lara put enough distance between her and the avalanche's initial push to prevent her from getting completely buried alive.

After digging herself out of the fresh powder, Lara's radio sputters to life. She can hear Jonah's garbled voice cracking through the airwaves.

"Jonah, if you can hear me, go back," she responds. "Please don't try to find me. I need to do this alone."

Lara's avalanche escape is an example of how Crystal Dynamics aims to fill Rise of the Tomb Raider with more of the harrowing action set pieces that were popular in the 2013 reboot. However, Lara will have a more persistent battle to fight as she marches through the wilds of Siberia. Storms whip up out of nowhere at a moment's notice, and the forest is populated with hungry wolves and territorial grizzlies. Crystal Dynamics wants Rise of the Tomb Raider's world to feel like a hostile and formidable character — the environment itself is Lara's main antagonist.

"The goal is to raise the stakes against her," Hughes says. "Lara learned a lot in the last game, but she doesn't have unflicking confidence. She can't face unlimited opponents unscathed. She's in a life-and-death situation, so we want to capture a certain amount of humanity by showing that Lara is continually challenged as a character. It's important for us to capture those moments where Lara is uncertain about her identity, her direction, or her ability to come out alive."

Thankfully, as Lara becomes more proficient in her survival skills, she learns to exploit the environment to even the odds. Her main means of this is through a detailed crafting system. In the 2013

Tomb Raider reboot, Lara collected salvage, which she used to upgrade her weapons, but in Rise of the Tomb Raider, Crystal Dynamics has greatly expanded on Lara's survivalist toolkit.

Lara now collects a variety of different resources such as plants, minerals, metals, clothes, hides, and other rare relics, and can then use these components to create a variety of new tools and weapons. For example, we watched Lara upgrade one of her climbing axes into a makeshift grappling line that allows her to swing over deep ravines. Meanwhile, a piece of cloth and some herbs can be used to bind Lara's wounds. Other resources let Lara craft poison ammo, construct traps, and even make Molotov cocktails or grenades.

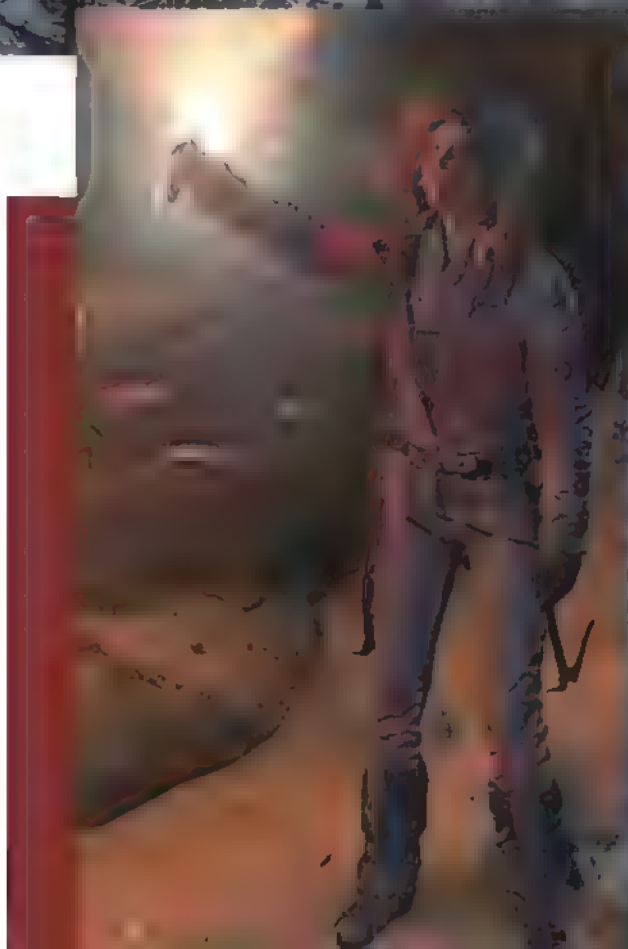
As in the last game, Lara is able to upgrade her weapons, but now she has more than one of each weapon type to choose from. For example, Lara can craft a variety of different bows with different properties. A compound bow might have greater stopping power than a traditional longbow, but it might also take Lara longer to prime each arrow to fire. Furthermore, some

upgrades apply to all weapons of that type, while other upgrades only apply to a specific weapon.

Once Lara has the components she needs, crafting new tools and gear is easy, but Rise of the Tomb Raider's ambient weather systems make gathering certain resources a challenge. Some animals might go into hiding during a storm, others will only come out at certain times of the day.

"You might have a particular upgrade that requires an alpha wolf hide, but wolves only come out at night in the valley," says Holmes. "So you have this idea that the environment and the weather conditions might affect the gameplay. This will also apply to combat, so enemy line of sight or hearing might be impaired by things like fog or rain."

Just as Lara gathers elements from the environment to improve her toolset, she'll also need to make clever use of her surroundings during battle. Wolves and bears aren't the only threats lurking in these Russian badlands, and she's about to encounter the world's most dangerous game: man.





OUT OF A MOUNTAIN

Lara isn't the first person to make a pilgrimage toward the invisible city of Kitezh. At one point in the game, she climbs over a mountain range and gets a panoramic view of an abandoned Cold War installation, which has been largely reclaimed by nature. Lara discovered hub areas like this in the last

game, but *Rise of the Tomb Raider*'s hubs are two to three times bigger. These areas offer Lara more opportunities to explore, plan her attack, and collect secrets and supplies.

As Lara makes her way toward the installation, a helicopter flies overhead and Lara spies the word Trinity written

on the side. It's a name she's become uneasily familiar with over the last year. Trinity occasionally pops up among conspiracy theorists who research the myths Lara is asking her life to find.

Devoted *Tomb Raider* fans might also be familiar with the name Trinity. Crystal Dynamics dropped hints about

the organization's existence in the 2013 reboot. In that game, a set of secret GPS documents alluded to a secret organization that seemed to have enough knowledge and resources to send an agent to the island of Yamatai as early as World War II. Lara doesn't know what the organization is doing in Siberia, but if they're looking for clues to Kitezh that's bad news for her. And she's bad news for them.

As Lara moves deeper into the Cold War installation, she discovers a group of Trinity soldiers looking for a map. Lara needs to find a way through their encampment. Fortunately, she has a couple new avenues to navigate through the environment; Lara can now scale trees, hide in small brush, and swim underwater. Although these aren't particularly novel means of travel for a video game, they do give Lara a more diverse range of options with which to approach a group of enemies.

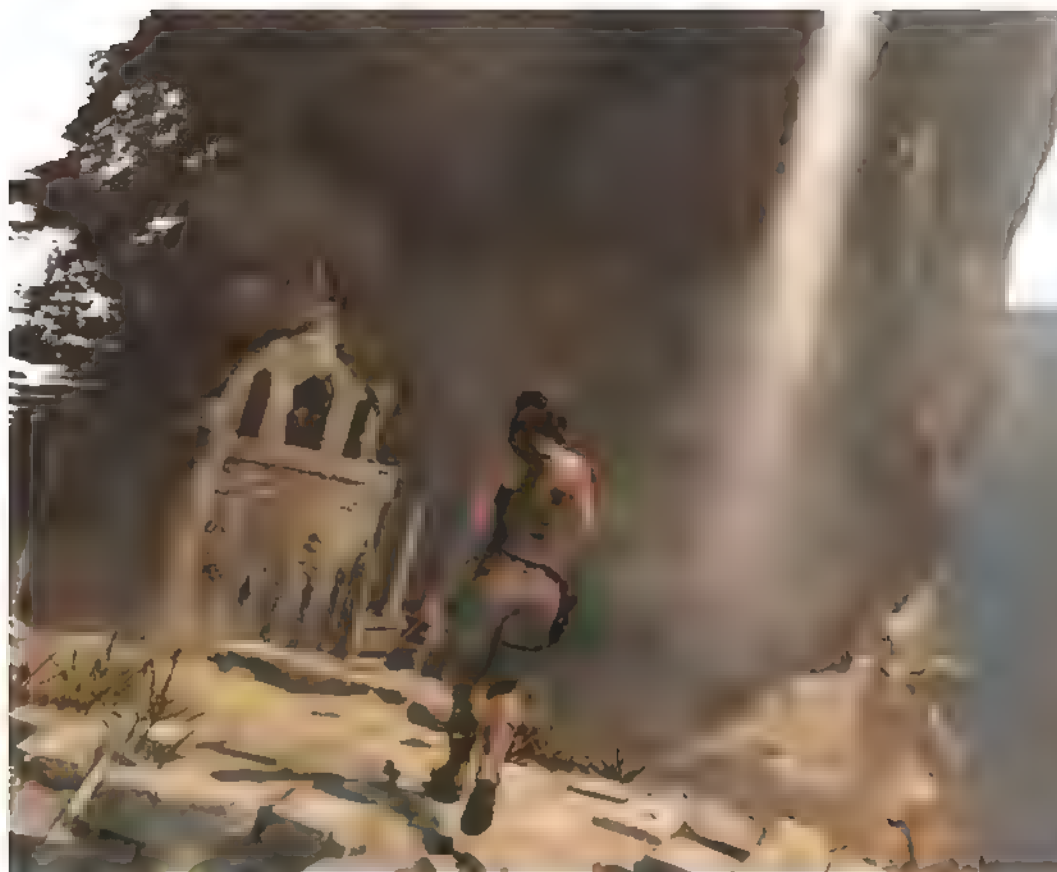
Lara can use one of her axes to craft a grappling hook that allows her to reach new areas and swing over gaps.



ANCIENT DECODER RINGS

The 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot tasked players with discovering hidden GPS caches, which contained extra salvage and buried manuscripts that offered a deeper glimpse into the series' lore. Lara will continue to uncover hidden caches in *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, but she'll also run across various writings on ancient Mongolian obelisks that she might not be able to read at the beginning of the game. These obelisks function like treasure maps, but will require a bit of decoding. As Lara collects fragments of ancient scripts, she can start to piece together the ancient language written on these obelisks and will eventually be able to read these markers, which in turn will lead her to new narrative elements or an ancient store of secrets.





The *Tomb Raider: The Ten Thousand Immortals* novel and the recent Dark Horse Comics series detail Lara's exploits over the course of the year between the two games and drop more hints about the Trinity organization Lara will fight in *Rise of the Tomb Raider*

"Our goals for combat are to give players as many opportunities as they can to engage combat on their own terms," says Hughes. "We wanted to push on the pre-combat phase, before Lara is spotted. The goal will rarely be for Lara to sneak past everybody, but there will be opportunities for her to sneak through a camp and gain a better lay of the land before engaging the enemy head-on. We wanted to give players more of those situations and more tools to use in those situations."

Lara silently dives into the water and swims across the bank to where a guard stands watch. With snake-like fluidity,

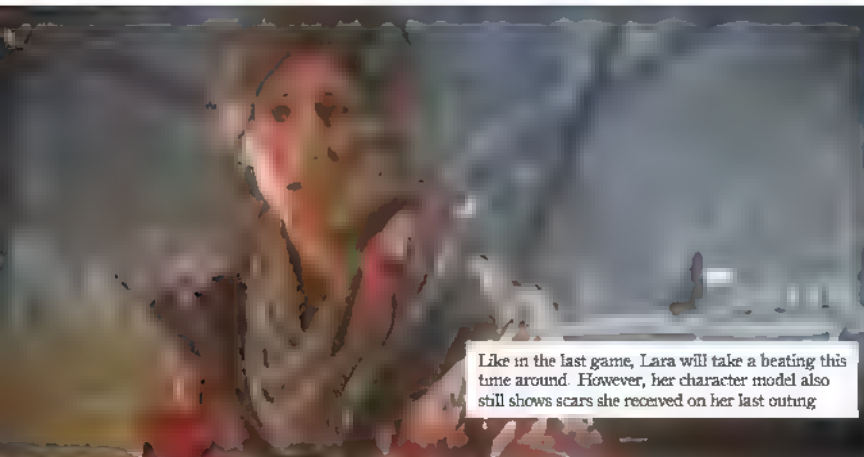
Lara wrenches the guard underwater, chokes him out with her bow, and then leaves his body at the bottom of the riverbed. Lara then uses a row of small bushes to circumnavigate the perimeter of the camp, where she grabs a gas can and a radio. The radio provides a perfect distraction to lure a group of enemies over to a bonfire. The gas can causes an explosion that takes them all out in one bang.

"You can lose guys once enemies are aware of your location, but it's usually better to fight noise with noise," says Hughes. "We try to keep the pressure on. We don't want players to feel so

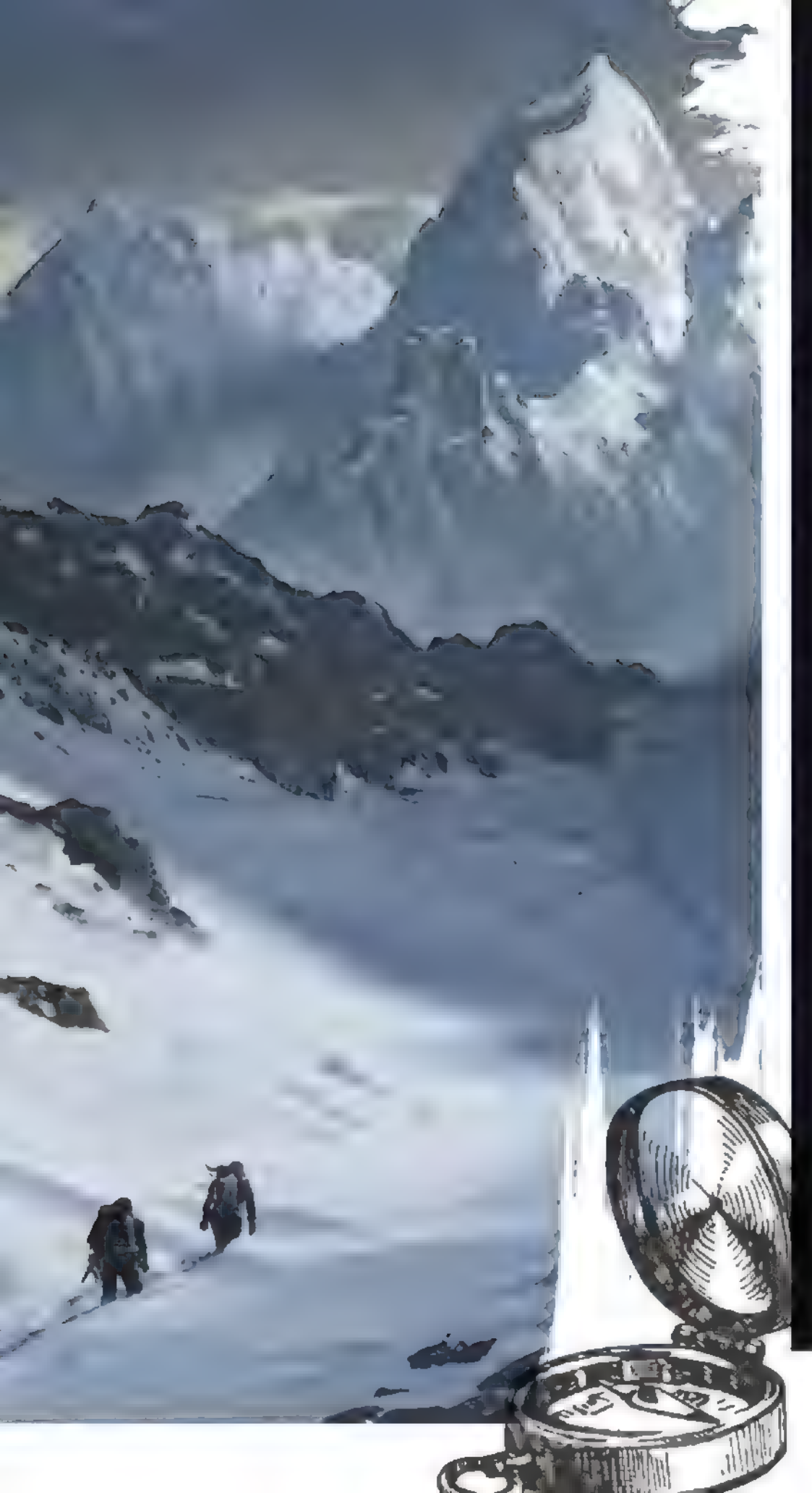
dominant that they can always reset the guards to a dumb oblivious state. There are repercussions for getting caught, and it's harder to evade once the fight is on. But that's where chaos becomes useful. You might be able to distract the guards with an explosion or gas bomb and then escape for a moment to heal before diving back into the fray. We tend to put you in a pressure cooker once awareness kicks off."

With a group of enemies closing in on her position, Lara puts her guerilla tactics to use with a gas bomb, buying enough time to put some distance between her and her foes. She swings off a tree branch and lands safely behind cover (at least for a minute), where she binds her wounds and then makes a poison arrow on the fly. Watching Lara navigate the environment and use discarded refuse as killing tools, it's hard not to think back to Naughty Dog's critically lauded *The Last of Us* and its gritty, improv-driven combat.

Thankfully, it doesn't take much longer for Lara to clear out the enemy encampment, but this won't be Lara's last battle with Trinity. She has a long journey ahead of her, and now she's in a race to find the secrets of Kitezh before an invisible society with enough bankroll to fund a private army can get their hands on them. Up ahead, amidst a rocky outcropping, Lara can see a small opening. Inside is a cavern no human has entered for centuries. Who knows what she'll discover inside: human remains, deadly traps, priceless knowledge...or perhaps immortality?



Like in the last game, Lara will take a beating this time around. However, her character model also still shows scars she received on her last outing



ROOM FOR TOMB

For a game called *Tomb Raider*, many of the 2013 reboot's tombs felt like side projects. Most of these puzzle rooms were fairly short, and some of them were optional. With *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Crystal Dynamics wants to put a greater emphasis on these underground puzzle chambers. Sadly, the team wasn't ready to showcase specific tombs from *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, but they did talk a bit about their philosophy behind tomb building.

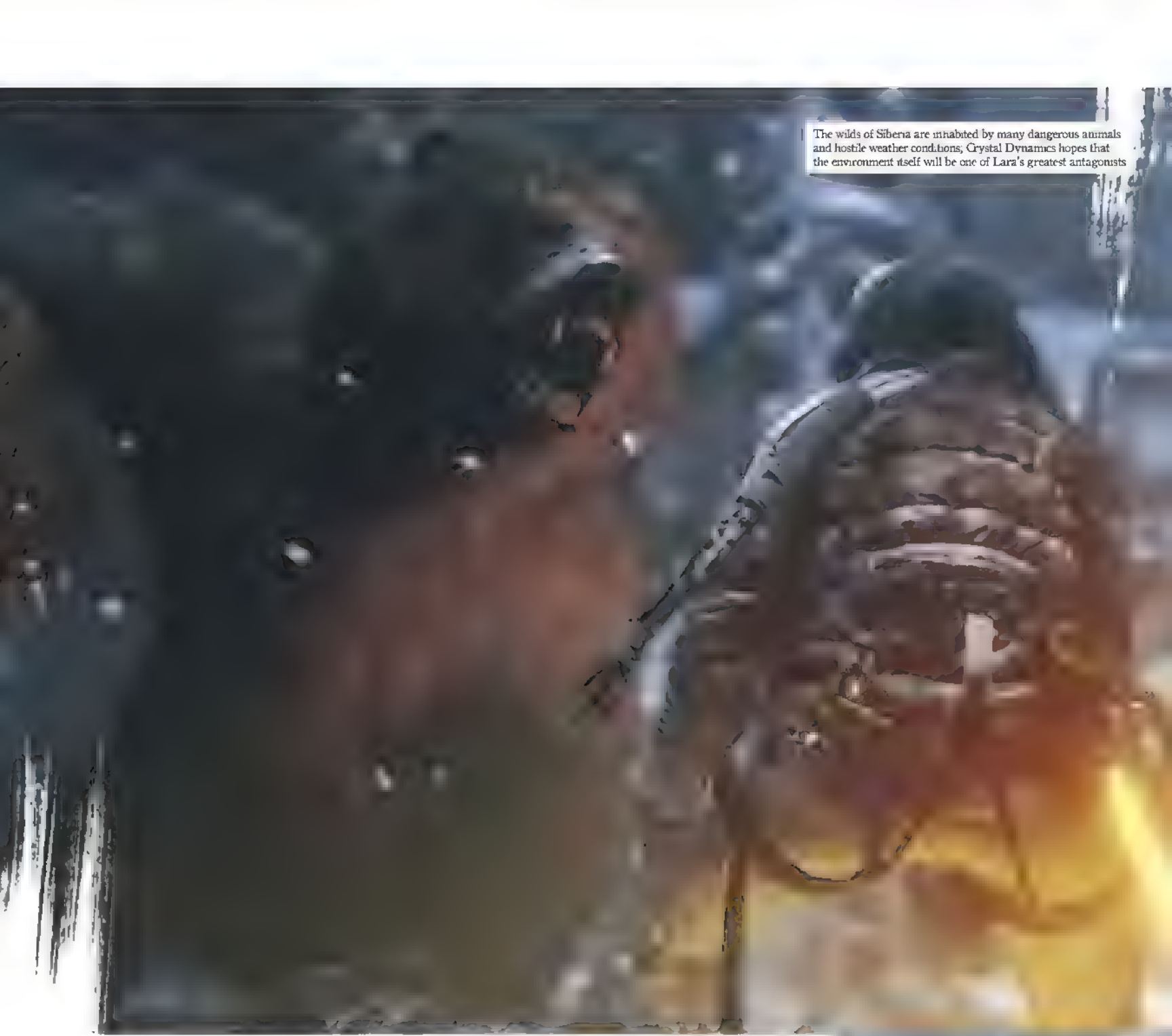
"We'll have more tombs in the game featuring a full spectrum of puzzles," says franchise creative director Noah Hughes. "Some tombs are much larger than in the last game. We really do celebrate puzzle design as a unique facet of our gameplay. We want to deliver on people's use of their wits and encourage them to suss out how to unlock each tomb's secrets while leveraging real-world systems and physics."

The studio also wants to return to the concept of nested puzzles. This was actually a common tactic in classic *Tomb Raider* games, where a player might have to solve multiple sides in a multistage puzzle before the final pieces clicked together and the larger secret unlocked. This gives players the opportunity to tinker with different elements around the environment so when they get stuck in one section of the puzzle, they can jump over to another area and try to solve that sequence before going back to the place they got hung up. Crystal Dynamics is also working to integrate more traversal challenges or even combat sequences into the middle of environmental puzzles.

"It's a challenge to create puzzles that make sense for a realistic world," says Hughes. "The push this time will be to make sure that a lot of the spaces are ancient spaces that feel awe inspiring. We want puzzles to make logical sense, so the solutions to the puzzles in this game won't always be some confounding security system of the ancients; it might be that Lara just needs to navigate the space in a way that subverts its original intent."

Hughes talked about layers of history. During Lara's journey she'll pass the remains of dozens of previous explorers. The Mongols weren't the only people to search for the lost city of Kitezh. Its legend tantalized a host of treasure seekers, so throughout the centuries there have been numerous explorers attracted to Kitezh's ghost. With every step Lara takes into these tombs, she gets further than one of these previous waves.





The wilds of Siberia are inhabited by many dangerous animals and hostile weather conditions; Crystal Dynamics hopes that the environment itself will be one of Lara's greatest antagonists

SIBERIAN ADVENTURE

When Lara was shipwrecked on Yamatai she was forced to live like a scavenger, fighting for her life. She emerged a stronger and more capable woman, but in many ways she became a broken soul. To Lara, the secrets of the lost city of Kitezh are a tantalizing saive. But her psychological healing won't come cheap. To overcome her personal demons, she'll have to best nature's savage elements and compete with one of the most powerful secret organizations on the planet.

"We talk about games like *Uncharted 2* or *Assassin's Creed II*, series that in their first outing had a really inspiring

new gameplay proposition, but didn't fully realize that experience until the sequel," says Hughes. "That's what our team is aiming to do – really trying to outdo ourselves."

Considering the popularity of the last *Tomb Raider*, Crystal Dynamics has a lot to live up to, but the studio seems on the right track. *Rise of the Tomb Raider*'s hostile environments, resource-rich ecosystems, and ruthless guerilla combat aim to raise the stakes on a formula the studio established only two years ago.

Lara once saw herself as a survivor; a woman who had to do the

unthinkable to save herself and her friends. She once saw herself as an archaeologist; now she realizes that archaeology isn't just about artifacts and ruins; it's about mankind's lost secrets. Lara is ready to crawl through the world's cracks and reach through time to retrieve those secrets. She's no longer a survivor. She's a tomb raider. ♦

*To explore a month's worth of *Rise of the Tomb Raider* updates including a deeper dive into the myth of Kitezh as well as interviews with the project leads, Lara's performer Camilla Luddington, and lead writer Rhianna Pratchett, head to gameinformer.com/ROTTR*



Crystal dynamics used a system called world machine to help generate giant mountain ranges, and spent six months alone perfecting the game's snow

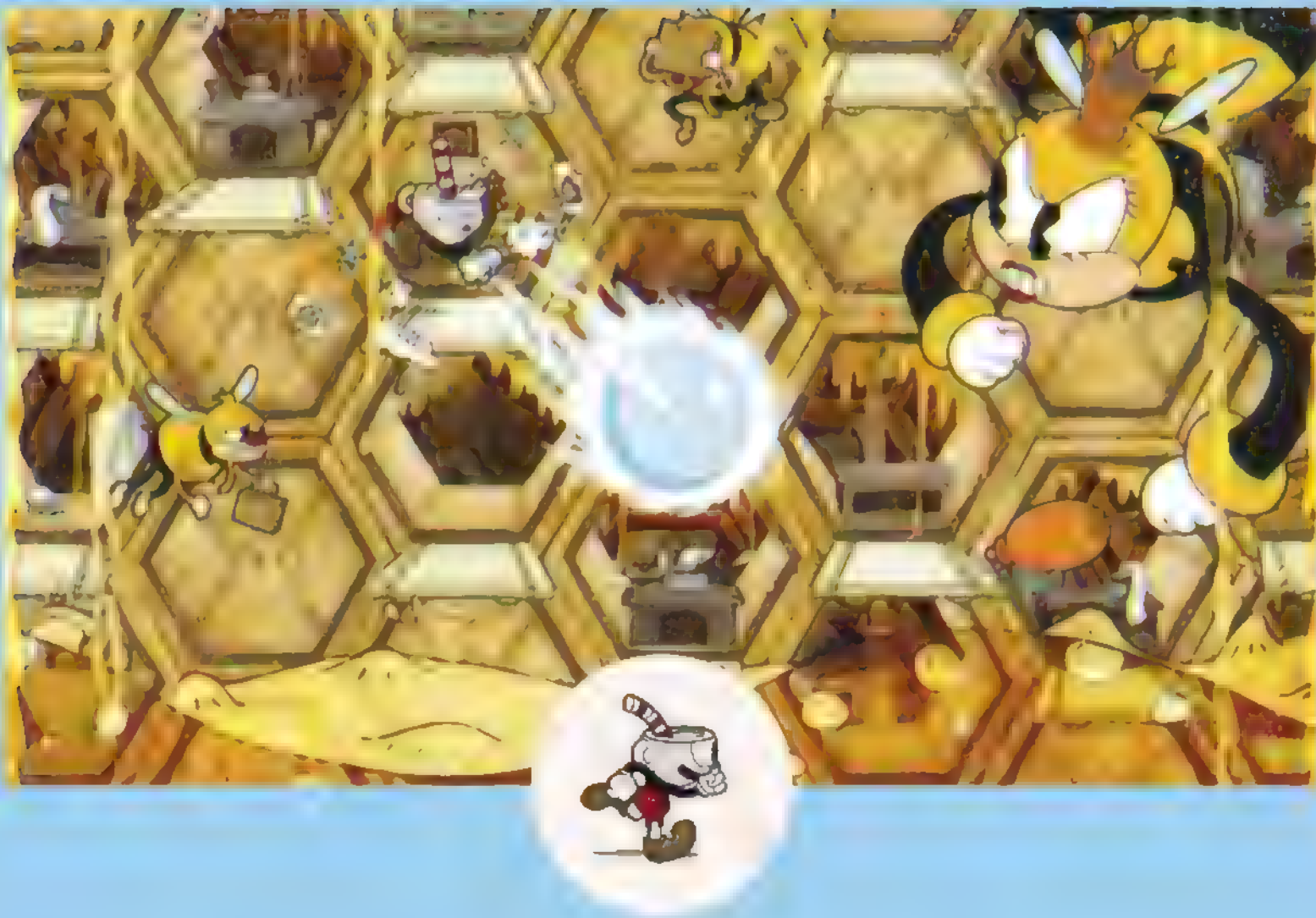


Getting A Bundle On

CUPHEAD



• **Platform:** Xbox One • PC • **Style:** 1 or 2-Player Action
• **Publisher:** StudioMDHR • **Developer:** StudioMDHR • **Release:** 2015



We've got an exclusive, behind-the-scenes look at the labor-intensive development of Cuphead and the effort that goes into creating its striking visuals.

Cuphead made a big impression at its E3 2014 debut. The hand-drawn aesthetic – animated in the style of classic cartoons from the 1930s – stood out among the rest of the games shown in Microsoft's indie-game compilation video. Viewers weren't the only ones blown away. Cuphead's creators, brothers Chad and Jared Moldenhauer, watched from home (on what Chad recalls was "a horrible stream") and were stunned by the immediate response from attendees and reporters.

"We were so used to seeing it, and we loved the visuals," Jared says. "But after a while you just get accustomed to them and you go, 'I hope people like these.' Then E3 happened and websites started

picking it up, my brain still didn't quite get it. I didn't expect too much of a response, to be honest, from E3. I thought that there would be some fans, but seeing it pop up as the 'top five interesting things at E3' on more than one website didn't make any sense. ...I'm still kind of in shock."

Since then, the brothers have ramped up production to a staff of nine artists, animators, and programmers to ensure that the game arrives before the end of 2015. Making games isn't easy, but Cuphead is a particularly labor-intensive production. I spoke with the brothers about how development is going, and got a glimpse at how its retro aesthetic extends to the way that it's being created.

by Jeff Cork



The Story So Far

If you've only seen a few screenshots – or even the trailer – you might assume that Cuphead is a side-scrolling platformer. It certainly shares elements from the genre, with one notable difference: It's all about boss battles. The Moldenhauer brothers grew up playing run-and-gun classics like *Contra* and *Treasure's* games, but the boss encounters held a special place in their hearts. With Cuphead, they're stripping away the level boss-evil boss rhythm, and skipping right to the best parts: battles with weird, screen-filling big baddies. From what we saw, StudioMDHR is cramming in a lot of variety within that structure.

When we start, Cuphead is at the devil's place with Mugman, the player-two character. They're gambling

with the devil when they run out of dough. Sensing an opportunity, the devil offers them one last run, if they put something of value up as collateral. They agree to the terms, but lose once again. With that, the devil owns their heads – but he's willing to negotiate. If the pair travels the game's world and retrieves an item that he covets, he'll consider them even.

That scrap of a story is all players need to know. "Because we both grew up in the fast twitch arcade era, that's what we homed in on," Chad says. "We love the idea of not including too many cutscenes or too much story." There's not 15 minutes between boss fights. But at the same time, it calls back to the Fleischer Betty Boop early '30s era, where they were doing stuff that was almost just because."



Do not adjust your magazine. Cuphead's visuals include several blur effects to sell the illusion that it's a cartoon from the 1930s.

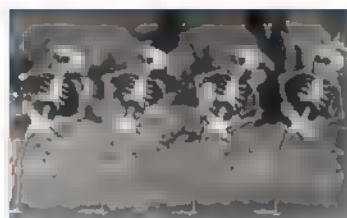
Plane Crazy

This birdhouse boss shows one of Cuphead's shooting stages, in which the hero takes the yoke of an airplane to defeat his foes – in this case, a bizarre bird. "Everything is like the '30s, and we wanted to have that – not just that it's a bird in the sky, but that it's a bird in a birdhouse," Jared says. "We want that secondary level of uniqueness to each visual. This is part of the first form." Here, the bird coughs up eggs that must be dodged. They hatch into projectiles, which players also have to dodge. "It's not like a bullet-hell pattern, but it's still very challenging. You might need a few tries to defeat the first form of this boss, based on your experience."

Cuphead can pull himself and the plane into a smaller, more nimble form during these shooter sections, though he isn't be able to attack. That ability aligns with the game's overall willingness to stretch, squish, and manipulate characters whenever it's necessary – just like in the old cartoons. Jared says the alternate form also breaks up the action and helps to

REQUIRED VIEWING

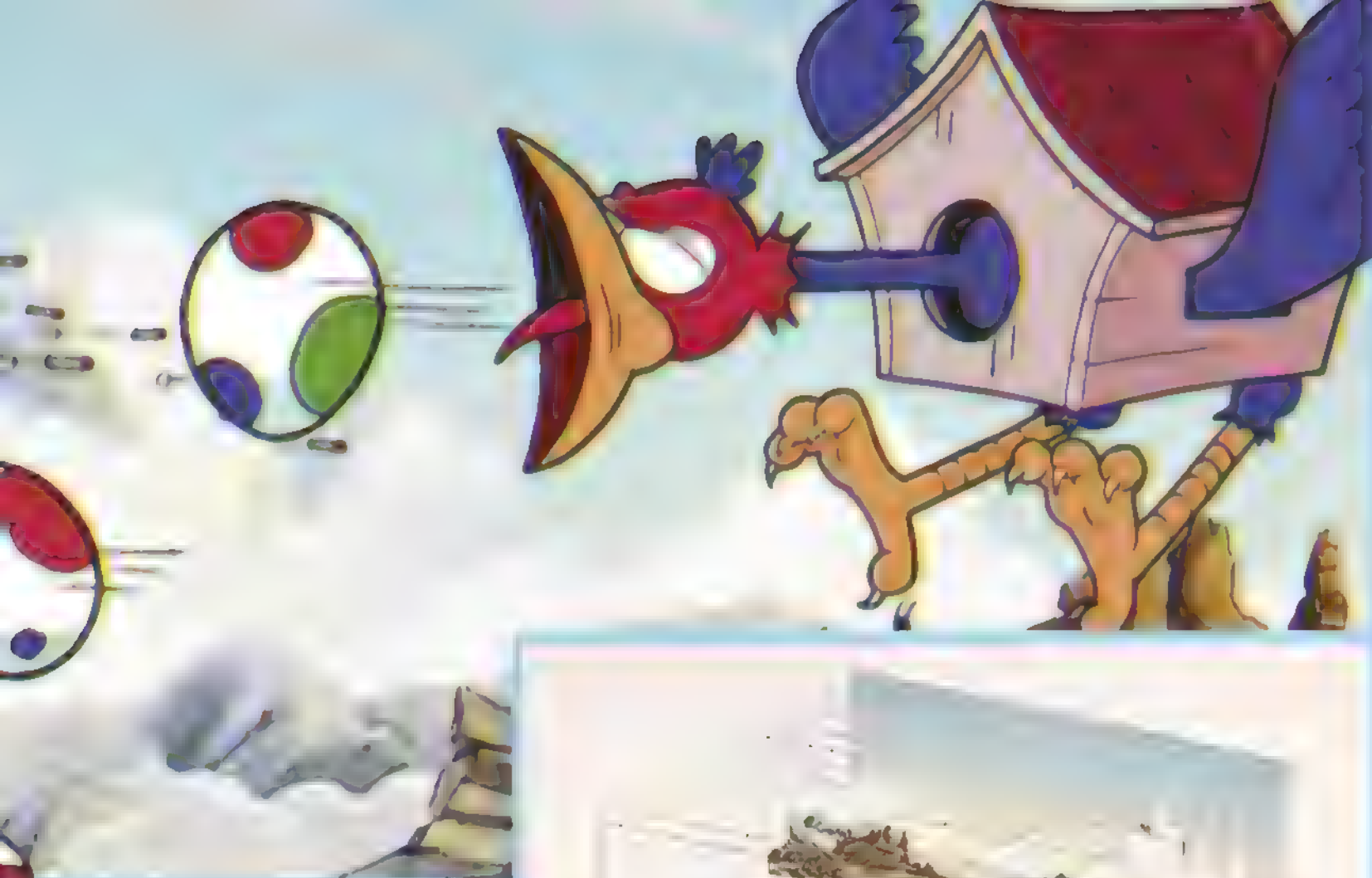
Cuphead's creators didn't just come up with the game's aesthetic out of the blue; they drew inspiration from classic cartoons from the '20s and '30s. We asked StudioMDHR's Chad Moldenhauer for some recommendations from the era. Here's what he suggested for people who want to get up to speed before the game comes out.



"The Skeleton Dance"
Walt Disney (1929)



"Swing You Sinners!"
Fleischer Studios (1930)



keep gameplay from simply being about holding down the fire button.

The backgrounds are handmade, too. In these cases, they're watercolor illustrations. This image (shown right) shows the various layers that the team has to paint to create the parallax scrolling effect. "In the old days, Disney, Fleischer, and other studios had to paint each layer on glass to make a multiplane camera shot, which is time consuming and hellish," Chad says. "Some elements they could paint on a cel, but if they wanted a big pan with a lot of foreground objects, it would have to be a pretty large piece of glass. We originally thought of that too, but scanning glass creates a lot of light leak and other time-consuming problems."

"It's crazy enough as it is," Jared says. "We don't need to set up miniatures and glass paintings to get one scene. What we are doing is still obscene."

Here, you can also get a sense of how many effects layers go into creating each background scene. The team adds two blur passes, and then other effects – like

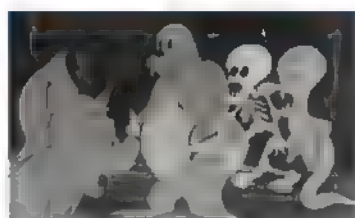


simulated scratches and hair – are added to mimic the visual effect that the game is being played on old film stock. "The reason we separated them like that is there's almost never a time on screen where you're seeing the same layers of noise and grain interacting with each other," Chad says. "So it never feels like you're watching a loop of effects. When we first started we noticed that when you have certain cigarette burns or other things on the screen that kept repeating, you eventually started

thinking, 'Oh, look, it's at the top right every seven seconds.' So we've put in a lot of work extensively with those effects especially to eliminate that and still keep the old-timey feel. I'm pretty sure if you tallied up all the time we spent discussing or researching and actually testing out effects, we're probably at about a three-and-a-half full-time months with three people, because we were experimenting with this back before any real development on the game started just to pull off the old-time film look."



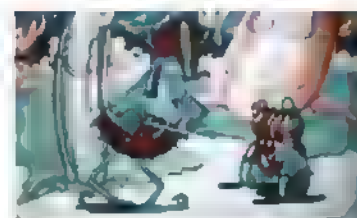
"Bimbo's Initiation"
Fleischer Studios (1931)



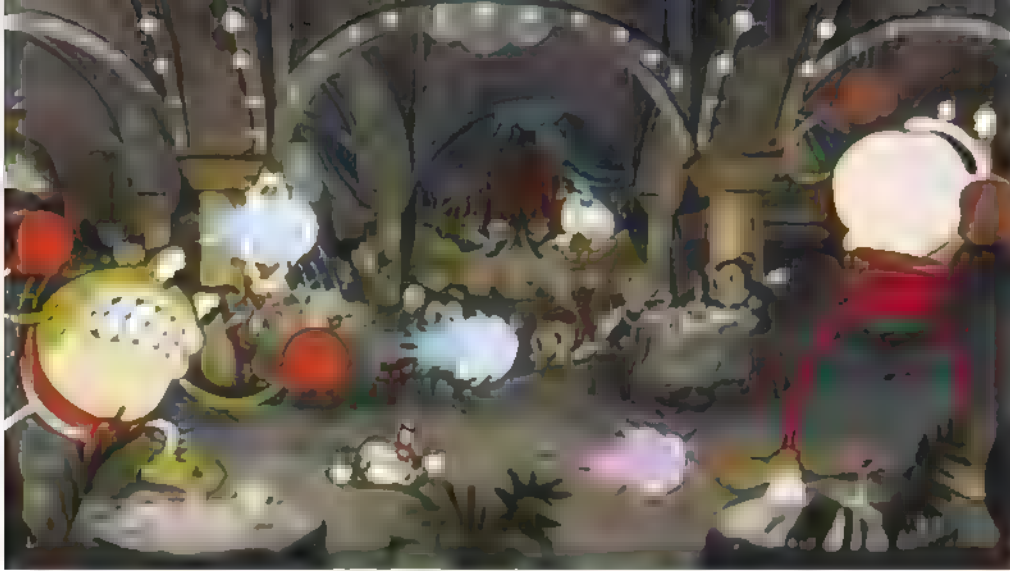
"Minnie The Moocher"
Fleischer Studios (1932)



"The Mad Doctor"
Walt Disney (1933)



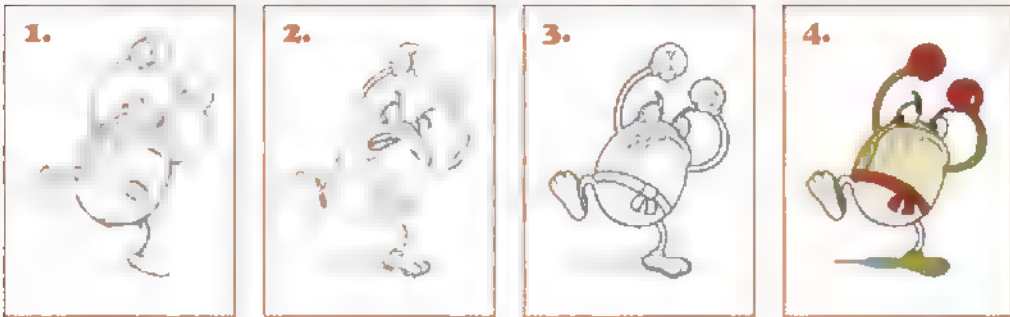
"Halloween Land"
Ub Iwerks (1935)



DRAWING A CROWD

Cuphead's look may draw from old school cartoons, but it features winks to classic video games. Take this battle against a tag-teaming frog duo, which takes place in a fly filled bar "This is our nod to Street Fighter," Chad says. "You have to fight both of them at once, which is also a fun animation challenge. They switch the side of the screen, and we also put characters in the background cheering you on just like [in Street Fighter]" The frogs split up, covering both ends of the screen in what Chad calls "a hectic nightmare of dodging."

Now that you've seen Cuphead's amphibious adversaries, here's a glimpse of what goes into creating them. Chad says each character begins as a crude thumbnail image (not pictured), just to help the artist conceptualize what they're trying to get across.



1. "From those thumbnails, you go into a rough first stage. You get your forms and shapes and the flow of the animation, and you only make key frames that you need to sell the idea to the team. If a guy leans back and throws his arm forward, you only need to do the stand, the lean back, and the forward to get that across."

2. "Once that's done, we add the inbetweens one by one. Then we pencil test it using similar methods of the old days by shooting each frame one at a time with camera or webcam. Once the pencil test is approved, each drawing gets one more pass to tie them down so the inker has a finalized line to follow. There are shortcuts we could take, like letting the computer squash or rotate certain frames, or drawing inbetweens digitally, but they don't have the same charm. We're doing none of that. Every single frame has to be drawn—even on effects. And since the majority of effects are easy to draw, we've been creating original assets for most of them. If Boss A hits the ground, here's a unique dust cloud, when Boss B hits the ground, [we create] a brand new dust cloud—just because. Creating it all from scratch is still very time consuming, but it completes the look."

3. "The third stage is the inked version. Once the drawing is finalized, we ink the frame on a fresh piece of paper, using the bottom drawing as a guide. This stage usually requires a good eye for cleanup because there are still going to be a few straggling details that aren't the true lines."

4. "For stage four, this is where we break the traditional medium; it's colored in Photoshop. I know, we don't color it with paint. We're losers. The funny thing is we actually did a test of painting on a cel and scanning it, so we could compare it to a digital colored version. When you put the effects of the game on top, you actually can't pick out which one has been painted, because there's grain and effects and there's a little bit of blur and, to the human eye, it's basically the exact same thing. Which was good, because once the inking is done we just scan it in, delete any mistakes or smears, then just color it and not die a thousand deaths."

"Everything is already long enough, and if we added in that extra step of traditionally painting cels, we would have been dead," Jared adds. "We'd still be trying to get Cuphead animated." As it stands, Chad says they're currently drawing, inking, and coloring between 200-350 frames of animation every week.

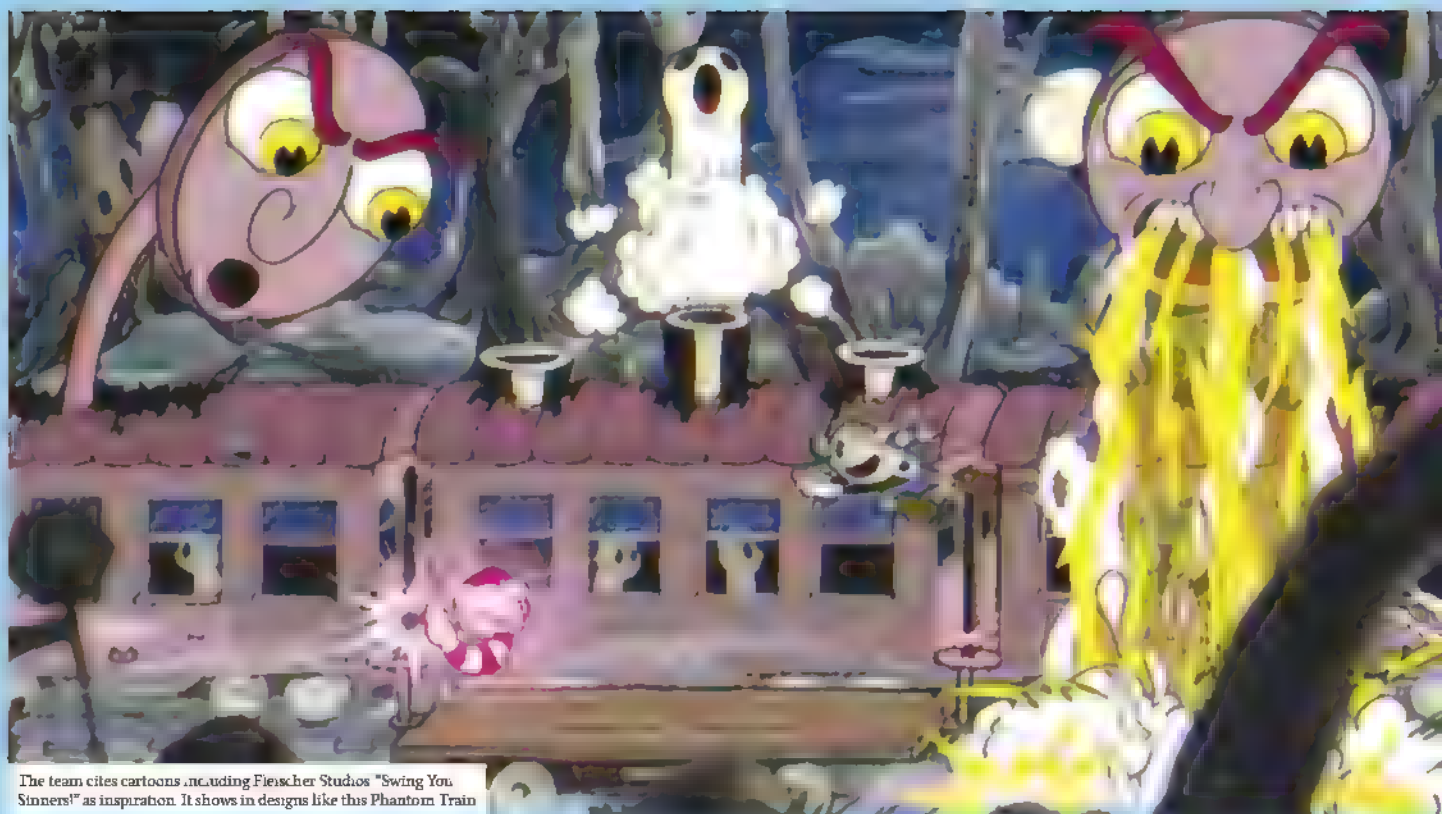
Straw Power

Cuphead and Mugman aren't just empty vessels—they've got straws protruding from their respective toppers. Cuphead's is long and bendy, while Mugman's is straight and short. Cosmetic differences aside, the tubes both have the same in-game function: the Straw Slap.

"Initially it was a core idea, that we always wanted a parry, but we got sidetracked and we forgot about the Miyamoto rules," Jared says, "which are, 'Keep things simple.' We were going to have a separate parry button, and then the parry could be performed on the ground. It didn't have the same impact as forcing a player to engage and change their position. If you could just stand still and tap parry, it didn't have the same response as having to commit to a jump to start a parry. The idea is that it's contained in the same button, which is far better to communicate to players. You jump and then it's timing-based depending on how close the shot is to you. Cuphead has about 15 frames of straw slap animation. If you connect this properly, you can land a slap and destroy any pink attacks that are in your radius."

"We made it a color that we're not going to use often in the game, so anything that's colored pink like that and is bright and shiny will be known as a parryable attack," Chad says. It's not just bullets, either. As you might notice in the image with the Phantom Train boss, the handcar that Cuphead and Mugman are riding has a pair of pink orbs. Parrying each one slides the car over to one side of the screen, which is a handy way to avoid the bosses and their various attacks.

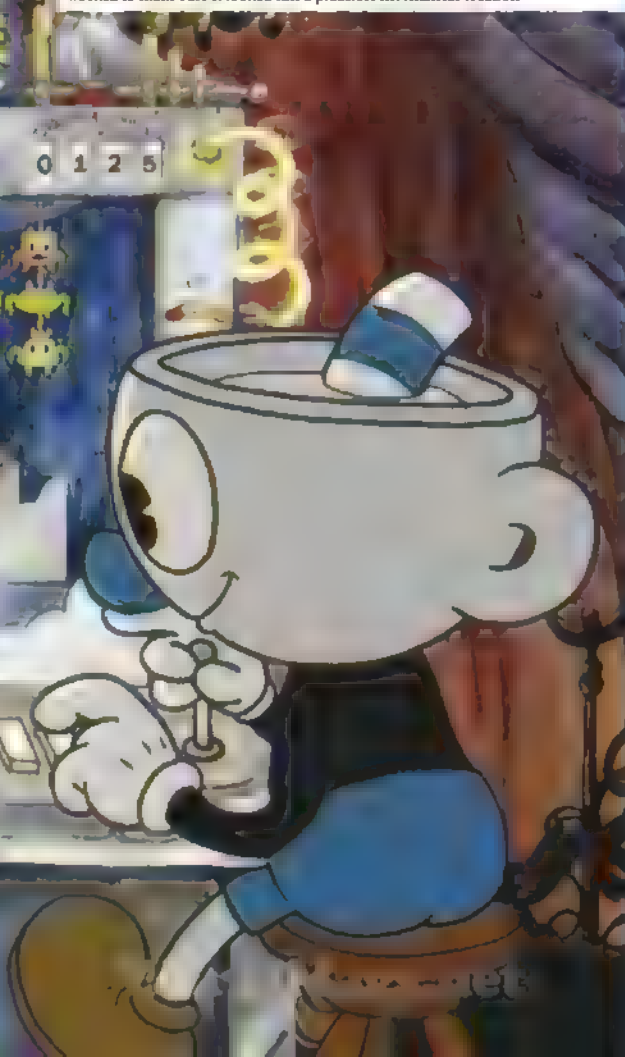




The team cites cartoons, including Fleischer Studios' "Swing Your Sinners!" as inspiration. It shows in designs like this Phantom Train



You may not be able to build this Moon Voyage machine at home, but StudioMDHR worked to make sure it looked like a plausible mechanical creation



Insert Coin

This boss (shown left) shows another example of how far the team is willing to push its boss-battle boundaries. Here, Cuphead takes on a boss via an antique-looking arcade machine, with each wave of tin enemies representing a form of the big baddie.

"This actually came from Jared," Chad says. "He wanted to have a tribute to the '80s arcade games and all of the classics of the era. Our brains initially told us, 'We'll do pixel art in some kind of 1930s style.' In the *Simpsons* cartoons, when they wanted to represent video games, they used some kind of pixel filter in post to achieve a style, so we started with that. We had this insane idea where we'd draw and ink all the assets for this level and then run every frame through a pixelation filter and finally re-ink every frame with the pixelated look. Aside from the amount of effort to do that, it was too jarring with the watercolor and cartoon visuals.

"This stage is a crazy idea because it's all new character assets, and we're limiting the player to only shoot up, so it's old arcade-style. It's definitely off the path of the main game, but we feel like the games we always played — like *Treasure's* — had a lot of love put into them, and they'd be just outside of the boundaries of what the rules were. They would always have unique gameplay ideas, so we're hoping this stage creates the same feeling for others.

"This is also something that you will only see once or twice; we aren't going to over-use it. In that sense, it's its own unique thing. Maybe in the future we'll have to do a spinoff game based on this old mechanical look, but for now this is one of our ways to keep things exciting — even if it's a lot of extra work, we think it's worth it in the end."



DANGER ALWAYS LURKS

MY THREE HOURS WITH THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

Geralt of Rivia is always searching for something. Whether he's looking for work, deadly monsters, or his memories, Geralt is constantly throwing himself into danger and overcoming the odds. At the end of *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*, he recovered his lost memories, finally remembering his last moments with his love, Yennefer. Now he's out to find her.

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt begins with Geralt tracking down his beloved sorceress, but this story isn't just about their reunion. CD Projekt RED surprised fans at the Game Awards in December with a trailer debuting a new second playable character: Ciri. After playing the opening three hours of Geralt's latest adventure, we discovered just how important Ciri is. She's not just another person to find; the fate of the world rests on Geralt keeping her safe.

by Kimberley Wallace

THE MYSTERIOUS CIRI

Ciri is a weapon of war. "She is the only person who can save the world, basically," says senior game designer Damien Monnier. Geralt must track her down before the Wild Hunt, a group of ghostly figures, finds her and uses her for destruction. Geralt has a long-standing personal connection to Ciri, acting as her father figure. He takes her under his wing and teaches her how to fight and survive in a cruel world.

In *The Witcher 3*'s opening, Geralt flashes back to his time mentoring Ciri at Kaer Morhen, a keep where witchers train. From the first moment we see her, it's clear that Ciri is a bit rebellious. Her teacher is Vesemir, one of the wisest witchers around, but he's fast asleep in a chair with Ciri nowhere in sight. Geralt wakes him up, and Vesemir explains that she refuses to do what she's told. In the distance, Ciri is in the courtyard; she sneaked off to do some combat training on her own. She's blindfolded and balancing on a beam as a huge log swings at her.

This scene showcases a different side of Geralt's personality than we've seen before. We're used to seeing him act like a confident smart-mouth, dealing with lowlifes and corrupt leaders. Here, he's sternly letting Ciri know of missteps as any mentor would, but you can tell he cares about her—even throwing in a few jokes to make her smile. The moment also provides a glimpse into Ciri's personality. Her cockiness reminds me a bit of Geralt's, and I like that she's not intimidated by him. In fact, she's extremely strong, wily, and smart, with the ability to think on her feet.

The next area serves as the tutorial, and CD Projekt RED has obviously listened to fan feedback. If you were turned off by *The Witcher 2*'s drawn-out introduction, *The Witcher 3* has much better pacing. The tutorial lessons are fast, easy to grasp, and fit into the storyline. Geralt tries to set an example for Ciri in training, but I was more intrigued by how sinister this seemingly innocuous moment becomes. Geralt notices something awry with a training dummy and finds blood dripping from it; he pulls back its fabric and



Style
1-Player Role-Playing
Publisher
Warner Bros.
Interactive
Developer
CD Projekt RED
Release
May 19

confirms it's a person. You can feel the tension as he looks anxiously for Ciri, then sees the Wild Hunt coming in on a ship. A sinister voice yells, "I've waited for this, White Wolf," and goes lunging toward Ciri. At that point, Geralt wakes up; though the sequence began as a flashback, the appearance of the Wild Hunt is more of a premonition than fact. Geralt is worried—when he's dreamt about Ciri before, she's actually been in danger.

CD Projekt RED confirmed that more flashback sequences occur, revealing more about Ciri and her relationship with Geralt. The team has also stayed true to the Witcher books. The books predate the video games, but CD Projekt RED says it's kept Ciri's history and personality in mind. Ciri is playable at certain points to give players a different perspective. "Allowing you to play as Ciri will make you understand the struggle," Monnier says. You won't constantly be switching back to her though; the team reserved this for key moments. Switching the perspective also allows CD Projekt RED to shake up the gameplay. Ciri's a faster fighter than Geralt, but she's also more fragile.

ENTERING A DANGEROUS WORLD

On Geralt's quest to find Yennefer, I finally get to explore the open world. Geralt has a horse to cover ground quickly (as well as sign posts for fast travel). The horse has a stamina meter, so you can only gallop at top speed for a short period. If you hold down a button, the horse automatically dodges obstacles in its path, so you don't need to steer. The horse also has a fear meter; if you get it too close to enemies, the horse gets spooked and tosses you off.

I notice beautiful mountains in the distance as I travel, but the cruelty of the world soon takes over as I witness a griffin attacking a merchant. The merchant hides under his carriage, but his poor horse has no protection. The griffin is devouring it alive. Geralt chases the beast away and helps the merchant back to his feet. When given the option, I decide not to ask for money in exchange for the assistance, which later nets me an extra discount at his shop. The merchant tells me of a nearby small town where his cousin owns the inn. When I ask about

Yennefer, he says he hasn't seen her, but it's possible she's stopped there.

The town is nothing extravagant, but it's still lively. People are working the fields, kids are playing and singing in the streets, and geese are fluttering about (you can actually chase them if you want). I make my way to the tavern, where I see thugs starting a fight, saying the town is Nilfgaard territory now. War brings out the worst in everyone, including these locals who can't seem to agree what's best for their town. As a witcher, Geralt attracts attention everywhere he goes, and his mere presence is raising tensions. Vesemir warns him not to start any trouble, but to ask around about Yennefer. Of course, nobody is willing to help, so Geralt taps into his power to charm people. I run into a scholar with some information, and he says he wants to write a book on war. I can either tell him he's crazy or encourage him. I go for the latter; I hope this ends up being a cool choice that bears fruit later on.

I find out that I need to talk to the general for more information on Yennefer, but on my way there, I get distracted

A crazy old lady is shouting about her missing pan, and I embark on my first sidequest. She tells me a weird man asked to borrow her pan; he took it, along with her house. Now it's locked and she can't get in. She's worried something bad happened inside.

This is an easy job for a witcher. I tap into the telekinesis power and blast the door open. Using his enhanced senses, Geralt goes into sleuth mode, examining objects and allowing you to slowly piece together what happened. What I like about tapping into this power is how the answers are rarely predictable. In this case, the man was writing a letter and needed the soot from the pan for ink. I retrieve the pan, but not before realizing the man also killed someone. The evidence? A dead body in the house. I let the lady know the bad news, but give her back her beloved pan, and she pays me for my troubles.

I finally reach the general and talk to him. As with most people you run into in the Witcher universe, he won't give me the info I need until I do him a favor. That griffin I saw earlier? I'm supposed to kill it.



THE GERALT, TRISS, YENNEFER LOVE TRIANGLE

Yennefer has been the love of Geralt's life, but when he lost his memory, we got stuck up there. Triss fell in love with him, and Geralt obviously cares about her, but who will make the final choice in whether Geralt ends up with Triss or Yennefer? After all, the franchise has always been about choice. "We really like our choices and we always have choices," says level designer Miles Tost. "It ultimately boils down to the player, but I obviously don't want to spoil any of the experiences. There's probably also something for the indecisive." Romance scenes are still part of the experience, so players will be able to build relationships up even more. "Love is part of Geralt's life, as it is the life of any mature and adult person," Tost says. "We want to create an adult experience and a mature story. [It's] entirely your decision how you play it out."

To gain an edge in the impending encounter, I also need to track down an herbalist and a hunter. Again, I get distracted on my way to them, and help out a man on the road who lost an important chest full of medicine. Once again I use my witcher senses to locate it, and I find a man slain by arrows nearby – arrows that belong to the quest-giver. He's a murderer, and I return and accuse him of it. He explains that he's just serving his men in a time of war and needed the medicine to keep them alive. I am given the option to keep the chest or return the medicine. I give the man the benefit of the doubt, but I do enjoy how the situation once again had surprising results – I'm left to second-guess my instinct to trust the quest-giver.

I find the hunter's shack, but he's not home. Thankfully, my witcher senses let me follow tracks to him, and he's found a dangerous group of wolves. I agree to help him and we take out a pack, then he shows me the griffin's nest. I investigate and then head to the herbalist, who is helping a recent victim of the griffin. The situation is helpless: This woman is going to die. Geralt can't even use his powers, because he doesn't know how a human body would handle them. I promise that the deaths end here, vowing to take the ugly bird out – but first I need to swim to the bottom of a lake to get the herbs I need. Swimming is easy and with a tap of a button you can dive down and explore for hidden items. You have an air meter, so you can't stay underwater for long, but it's pretty generous.



CD Projekt RED said this entry is a blank slate for the storyline, as newcomers shouldn't feel lost.

A witcher must know how to track an opponent



ON THE DELAYS

CD Projekt RED has delayed *Wild Hunt* a few times already, but the team is happy with those decisions. "As developers, everyone reads the comments, so we're well aware of what people think," says senior environment artist Jonas Mattsson. "We want to make sure they're happy with the experience they're [getting]."

After a year of rocky launches, CD Projekt RED especially wants to be cautious. "If anything, those [unpolished] titles that recently came out helped us prove a point," says senior game designer Damien Monnier. "We would have pushed the date anyway. We have this certain standard. We want it to be the best game we have ever made."



THE GRIFIN SHOWDOWN

The basics of the battle system haven't changed; you use strong and weak sword attacks, along with magic like *igni* and *quen*. Steel swords are best used on human enemies, while silver swords slay monsters. Before I battle the griffin, I gain access to the crossbow. This will come in handy to injure the griffin while it's flying, forcing it to land. Right off the bat, I notice the combat is smoother than it was in past games. This is something that CD Projekt RED was set on improving due to fan feedback. "The combat is much more fluid now, much more responsive, much more accessible, but still is a challenge to master," says senior environment artist Jonas Mattsson. It doesn't feel drastically different, but it's an improvement that fans will appreciate.

The griffin circles above and I ready my crossbow, trying to steadily aim and hit it before it moves. My successful shot knocks it down and I start using *igni*, engulfing the beast in flames. The ensuing battle has me relying on a handful of strategies. Each time it takes to the air, I shoot it down with the crossbow; when

it's on the ground and charging at me, I ready *quen* (a protective shield) to avoid extra damage, then alternate between *igni* and melee attacks. At one point, the griffin flies away and I chase it to a high ledge to finally kill the massive creature. This feels like a feat in itself, and I get a trophy that provides bonuses when equipped. I also level up for my efforts.

You can put your skill points into a wide variety of areas, such as combat, signs, and alchemy. Each category has its own skills and different tiers. For instance, in the "general" category, you can put points into increasing your max vitality or increasing your resistance to poison. You then equip the skills and attach a mutagen boost to increase their potential.

My work with the griffin is done and I head back for my reward. The general tells me that Yennefer has been in Visima all this time – a day's ride away. Before I leave town, I visit the tavern one last time and witness a violent scene. Tensions are high over the war, and some people can't forget the casualties the Nilfgaard caused to claim the land. An old lady is getting her head slammed

into the table for showing support to Nilfgaard. The scene is so brutal that I cringe and look away as the blood on her forehead grows, each hit sounding worse and worse. Thankfully, Geralt breaks up the fight and tends to her. He then tries to leave the town, but thugs ambush him and Vesemir on their way out. I don't have patience for this, so I go for the arrogant dialogue option and say how stupid they are for thinking they can take me on. I kill the three with ease, and the fight ends with a severed head. After the fight, Yennefer suddenly appears with a proposition – but I'll let you learn the details for yourself.

This is the first hands-on that CD Projekt RED has offered with *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, and I feel confident about its direction. The dialogue and voice work is fantastic, and the side stories littered throughout the world are intriguing. I found myself just wanting to explore every nook and cranny. Hopefully, the rest of the game can match the thrill I had for the first hours. I can't wait to play further, experience more choices, and see which of the 36 endings I get. ♦

CARRYING YOUR PREVIOUS CHOICES OVER

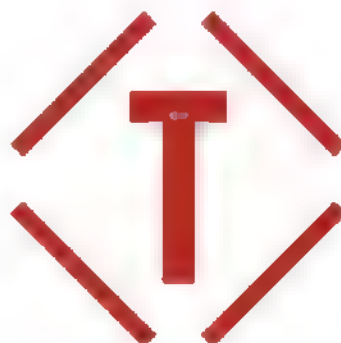
CD Projekt RED confirmed that your choices from previous games carry over into this one. If you have a PC save file and play *Wild Hunt* on PC, your save automatically transfers your choices. If you play on PlayStation 4 or Xbox One, you input your past choices. The team wouldn't say exactly how this process works, but definitely it will be a fun way for fans to acknowledge what they did in past games.



WHAT'S NEXT

A Look Ahead At Video Games In 2015

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This coming year is a pivotal one for the video game industry. The PlayStation 4 and Xbox One will be finishing their second year on the market, and gamers will be playing a slate of games that were truly made from the ground up for these new-gen consoles. From anticipated early releases like *Evolve* and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* to holiday blockbusters like *Halo 5* and *Uncharted 4*, it's going to be an amazing year.

This feature serves as your guide for the months to come – a roadmap to the games that will define 2015. We've included a ton of new previews of the year's hottest games, organized by release date – plus information on some big titles that don't have official launch dates yet.

Beyond the games, we've compiled a list of some of the people and studios to watch, from legendary designers making a fresh start like Ken Levine and Cliff Bleszinski to established companies like BioWare and Blizzard.

We'll also ask some of the questions that need to be answered in 2015 regarding the future of virtual reality, Nintendo's next console, Valve's Steam console, and more.

Based on everything we know now, this is shaping up to be an eventful year. The best part? With events like E3 and Gamescom still to come, there's a whole lot of great stuff we don't even know about yet. It's an exciting time to be a gamer.

By GI Staff





Evolve

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PC
DEVELOPER Turtle Rock Studios
PUBLISHER 2K Games
RELEASE February 10

Turtle Rock's *Evolve* will likely be the highlight of early 2015. It was originally slated to be a holiday season title in 2014, but was delayed in order to allow the studio to polish the unique, 4v1 multiplayer experience. *Evolve* pits a team of hunters versus a player-controlled monster that gains power as it feeds. This asymmetric multiplayer carves out a unique niche in the current online market. *Evolve* feels about as close to a sure thing as there is this year.

DEVELOPERS TO WATCH



MOJANG

With *Minecraft* continually evolving and *Scrolls* launched, there's a big question mark as to what's next for the developer. The company was purchased by Microsoft last year, and that undoubtedly changed some plans. Is there a *Minecraft 2* on the horizon? Something completely different? Mojang has shown it's not afraid to experiment with new ideas like the digital-tabletop strategy card game *Scrolls*, so the next title just might blow us away. If not, there's always more *Minecraft*.

Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate

PLATFORM 3DS
DEVELOPER Capcom
PUBLISHER Capcom
RELEASE February 13

Get ready to get back in the hunting spirit and craft that essential armor because Capcom's popular *Monster Hunter* series is back. This time, you're part of a traveling caravan trying to discover the origins of a virus that's infecting monsters. This entry is the biggest one to date; expect more monsters, a bigger focus on story, and more villages. For the first time, the series also has online multiplayer on 3DS, complete with different quests than the single-player mode.



Total War: Attila

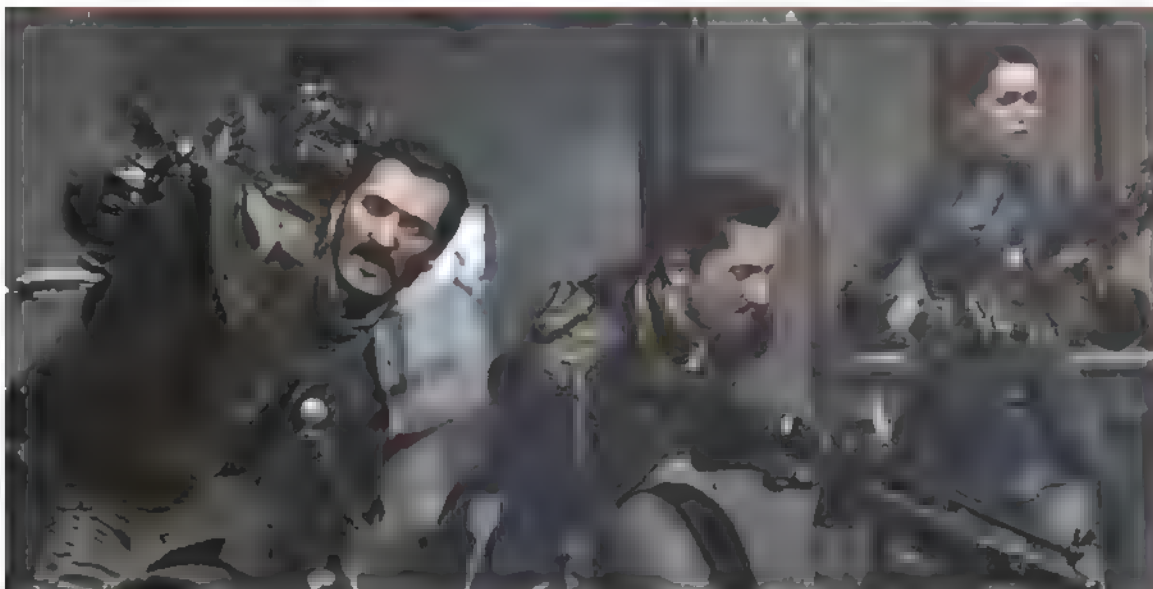
PLATFORM PC
DEVELOPER The Creative Assembly
PUBLISHER Sega
RELEASE February 17

Prepare to take on the titular Hun as you struggle to maintain a vast empire against aggressive, unwavering hordes. With some new mechanics, including siege escalation, settlement razing, and the terrifying battlefield implications of fire, this peek into war during the Dark Ages should provide something special for strategy fans. And once you're done fending off the enemy at the gates, you can always dive into some 4v4 multiplayer!

Kirby and the Rainbow Curse

PLATFORM Wii U
DEVELOPER HAL Laboratory
PUBLISHER Nintendo
RELEASE February 20

Kirby is bordering on becoming an annualized franchise, but *Rainbow Curse* stands out from his recent appearances for a number of reasons. Its clay aesthetic makes it look as though it has been modeled by hand, and the touch screen controls offer a platforming experience unlike any other. Modeled after 2005's *Canvas Curse*, players draw lines on the screen from which Kirby can roll and leap.



The Order: 1886

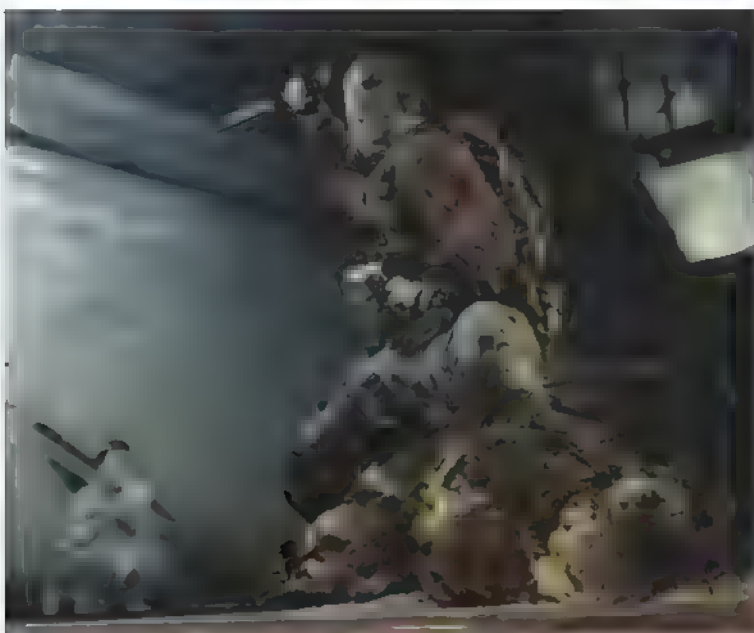
PLATFORM PS4

DEVELOPER Ready At Dawn

PUBLISHER Sony Computer Entertainment

RELEASE February 20

The talented studio that won acclaim for its impressive PSP God of War games is finally releasing a full-fledged PS4 title. This stunning third-person shooter teleports players to the world of Victorian Age London, with a classy steampunk twist. In this world, the Knights of the Round Table are highly skilled agents tasked with hunting down lycanthropic enemies and rebels with bizarre-yet-believable inventions and weapons.



Resident Evil Revelations 2

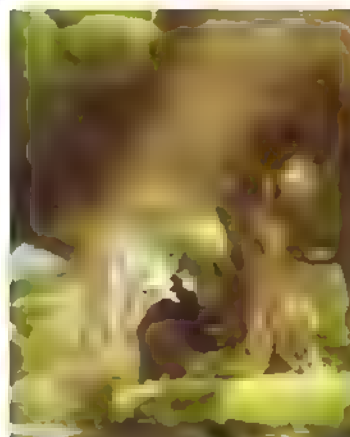
PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • Vita • PC

DEVELOPER Capcom

PUBLISHER Capcom

RELEASE February 24

When this Resident Evil spin-off series originally hit the 3DS, it surprised fans and gave them an entry more celebrated than the polarizing RE 6. Revelations 2 continues the storylines of Claire Redfield, Barry Burton, and his daughter Moira as they explore a demented torture island. Capcom is hoping to drum up excitement surrounding the mysterious plot by releasing four downloadable episodes a week apart, with a disc version following shortly after.



Ori and the Blind Forest

PLATFORM Xbox One • 360 • PC

DEVELOPER Moon Studios

PUBLISHER Microsoft Studios

RELEASE March 11

Moon Studios is hoping to find the right mix of Studio Ghibli-style fantasy visuals, tight platforming controls, and sprawling 2D environments for its colorful upcoming Microsoft exclusive, Ori and the Blind Forest. Players help a spirit named Ori bring the forest back to life while unlocking new powers and areas to explore, similar to classic platformers such as Super Metroid and Castlevania: Symphony of the Night. Based on our early hands-on time, we'd say Moon Studios is definitely on the right track.

PEOPLE TO WATCH



MICHEL ANCEL

Last year, Rayman creator Michel Ancel announced he was creating a small, indie studio named Wild Sheep. While he'll still continue working at Ubisoft (presumably on the long-awaited Beyond Good & Evil 2), his new venture is giving him a chance to branch out. The studio's first game is the PS4-exclusive Wild, a survival game Ancel says features a world as large as Europe. His games have long put a premium on fantastical characters and rewarding players for exploration, and Ancel seems like he's doubling down on those elements.

Devil May Cry: Definitive Edition

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One

DEVELOPER Ninja Theory

PUBLISHER Capcom

RELEASE March 10

If you haven't played Ninja Theory's Devil May Cry reboot, now is the time. This enhanced version runs at 60 fps and 1080p, and contains the full game plus all of the DLC—including the story-based scenario starring Vergil as a playable character. Returning players will appreciate the variety of mechanical tweaks to further refine the combat, along with new costumes and modes. The additions aren't drastic, but we'll take any excuse to revisit this entertaining breed of stylish action.

Code Name: S.T.E.A.M.

PLATFORM 3DS

DEVELOPER Intelligent Systems

PUBLISHER Nintendo

RELEASE March 13

Developed by the team behind strategy titles like Fire Emblem and Advance Wars, Code Name S.T.E.A.M. is a new IP from Nintendo that looks closer to modern strategy title XCOM than it does to the grid-based game play for which Intelligent Systems is known. It also features a bizarre alternate history cast of fighters like Abraham Lincoln and literary characters like Tom Sawyer.

PEOPLE TO WATCH



AMY HENNIG

The gaming world was shocked when lead *Uncharted* writer Amy Hennig departed Naughty Dog after many successful years at the studio. This was a surprise to *Uncharted* fans who questioned how it would affect *Uncharted 4*. Thankfully, Hennig landed on her feet at EA, and is now at work on an unannounced *Star Wars* project – which many assume evolved out of the canceled *Star Wars 1313* third-person action game shown at E3 in 2012. Hennig's deft touch with dialogue should serve the franchise well.

Final Fantasy Type-0 HD

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One
DEVELOPER Square Enix
PUBLISHER Square Enix
RELEASE March 17

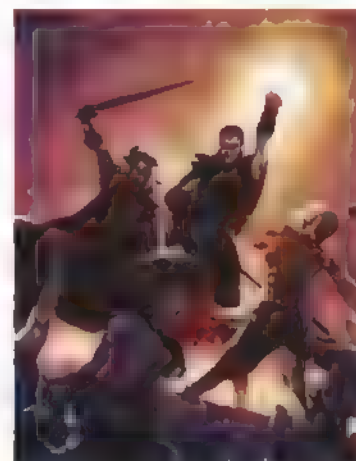
North American fans missed out on *Final Fantasy Type-0* due to its release late in the PSP's lifecycle. This remastered version is their chance to finally dig into the story of 14 students pulled into a war between the Milites Empire and the Dominion Rubrum. Each student uses different weapons and special abilities, and you can swap between three characters on the battlefield.



Battlefield: Hardline

PLATFORMS PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • PC
DEVELOPER Visceral Games
PUBLISHER Electronic Arts
RELEASE March 17

Battlefield: Hardline takes the series' focus on military conflicts and changes the direction of multiplayer to be a game of "cops and robbers" over multiple adapted game modes. The concept of "Levolution" persists, as maps can change in drastic ways over the course of any given match. The overall package is tied together by a campaign about detectives caught in the middle of a drug war told in the style of a TV police drama.



Pillars of Eternity

PLATFORM PC • Mac • Linux
DEVELOPER Obsidian Entertainment
PUBLISHER Paradox Interactive
RELEASE March 26

Obsidian Entertainment, the studio behind excellent RPGs like *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II*, *Fallout: New Vegas*, and *South Park: The Stick of Truth* is finally crafting its own world from scratch. A spiritual successor to titles like *Baldur's Gate*, *Pillars of Eternity* is an old-school RPG with pause-and-play tactical combat. Obsidian crowd-funded more than \$4 million to create this original IP, giving the studio the resources to craft something worth getting excited about.



Bloodborne

PLATFORM PS4
DEVELOPER From Software
PUBLISHERS Sony Computer Entertainment, SCE Japan
RELEASE March 24

With tweaks on the *Souls* series providing the combat mechanics behind this atmospheric horror action/RPG, players will have to experience the nightmares of Yharnam without the benefits of a shield. Instead, players are thrust into the tense confines of battle with a system that keeps them gauging the ebb and flow of each fight. With a procedurally generated dungeon thrown into the mix as additional content, players will have plenty of additional terrors to explore in their own game – and their friends'.

Dark Souls II: Scholar of the First Sin Edition

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • PC

DEVELOPER From Software

PUBLISHER Bandai Namco

RELEASE April 7

Not only does this edition of Dark Souls II bring the game to new-gen platforms for a significant visual overhaul and include all of the DLC, but players will get to experience new content and more players involved in multiplayer gameplay. While Dark Souls II was already an incredible experience, it's going to really shine with the power of new hardware behind it.



Mortal Kombat X

PLATFORMS PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • PC

DEVELOPER NetherRealm Studios

PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

RELEASE April 14

Following 2011's revitalization of the Mortal Kombat franchise, NetherRealm Studios is back with the next entry in the bloody fighting franchise. This time around, the studio has implemented the environmental interactions from Injustice: Gods Among Us, as well as multiple fighting styles for each character to add untold depth to the existing mechanics. Add to that a more robust offering of online components, plus the trademark brutality the franchise is known for, and Mortal Kombat X should be a fan-pleasing entry.

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PC

DEVELOPER CD Projekt RED

PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

RELEASE May 19

Don't worry about running out of things to do in this massive RPG. Whether you're exploring the sprawling open world or leveraging Geralt's supernatural abilities in combat, The Witcher 3 will keep you engaged with cool quests and challenging decisions. The first entry in The Witcher series was good, and the second made huge strides in visuals, storytelling, and gameplay. The Witcher 3 is poised to make another leap forward, expanding and improving on every element of the experience.



Batman: Arkham Knight

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PC

DEVELOPER Rocksteady Studios

PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

RELEASE June 2

Batman: Arkham Knight was originally scheduled to release last year, but now it's on track to hit right in June, a traditional dead spot in the gaming landscape. The Dark Knight returns for what Rocksteady claims is its final run with the character. The team is pulling out all the stops in Batman's new-gen debut with amazing visuals, new combat and tools, and the long-awaited inclusion of the Batmobile. The signature ride can transform from hot rod to versatile tank at the press of a button, bringing a new angle to traversal, combat, and puzzle-solving.

DEVELOPERS TO WATCH



ROCKSTAR GAMES

Rockstar doesn't make small games. The company produces some of the grandest – and best selling – titles in the industry. Coming off of an excellent new-gen re-release of GTA V, millions of gamers are wondering what's next. Will the company release single-player DLC for GTA V as it did for GTA IV? What changes will we see in Grand Theft Auto Online? Will we see a Red Dead Redemption sequel? How about Bully? Does Agent still exist? So many questions – we're hoping for some answers in the coming year.

POTENTIAL RELEASES FOR 2015

Many titles don't have confirmed release dates, so we've ordered the following games alphabetically.



Abzu

PLATFORM PS4 • PC
DEVELOPER Giant Squid
PUBLISHER 505 Games

As the former art director at thatgamecompany (Journey), Matt Nava is well-versed in creating visually striking interactive experiences. Nava is applying that knowledge to Giant Squid's first indie offering, Abzu. Translating roughly to "ocean of wisdom," Abzu takes players on an adventure at the bottom of sea where they dodge sharks, swim with whales, and explore a variety of vibrant underwater locales. Based on the developer's name, we're guessing we might run into a couple of giant squids as well.

DEVELOPERS TO WATCH



BETHESDA GAME STUDIOS

The Bethesda Softworks publishing label released some impressive games in 2014, like Wolfenstein: The New Order and The Evil Within. However, we haven't seen anything from the internal development studio since Skyrim. After a few years in the shadows, the team (led by Todd Howard) should be ready to bring its next game into the spotlight soon. It seems like we hear rumors about a new Fallout every week...maybe this is the year one of them is proven true.



Assassin's Creed Victory

PLATFORM TBA
DEVELOPER Ubisoft Quebec
PUBLISHER Ubisoft

Leaked details late in 2014 forced Ubisoft to confirm not only the existence of Victory, but also its setting of Victorian-era London. For the first time, the Quebec studio (not Montreal) seems to be taking lead on this installment, and leaked images depict a sprawling, rain-swept cityscape to explore. After some major technical problems in Unity's roll-out, Ubisoft is undoubtedly hanging a lot of hopes on Victory restoring faith in its flagship franchise.

Axiom Verge

PLATFORM PS4 • Vita • PC
DEVELOPER Tom Happ
PUBLISHER Sony Computer Entertainment

Gamers have been dying for a new 2D Metroid game for over a decade, but not everyone is waiting for Nintendo to get off its butt and deliver a sequel. Indie dev Tom Happ has been working on his Samus-inspired side scroller for over four years, and we couldn't be more excited to dive into his retro alien world. Expect to see plenty of creative weaponry, massive bosses, and smoldering throwbacks to your favorite 8- and 16-bit action platformers.

Adrift

PLATFORM PlayStation 4 • Xbox One • PC
DEVELOPER Three One Zero
PUBLISHER 505 Games

Did you watch Gravity and think, "That catastrophic space disaster looks like fun?" Three One Zero's upcoming game aims to put you in the spacesuit of an astronaut in a similarly hopeless situation. After your ship is destroyed, you'll have to comb through the wreckage and try to salvage a way home. If that doesn't sound tense enough, here's another wrinkle: The game is being designed with VR in mind, so you'll feel all the more isolated.



PEOPLE TO WATCH



KOJI IGARASHI

The Castlevania series has been in a strange place for years. MercurySteam did the impossible by creating a highly praised 3D entry with Lord of Shadow, but Koji Igarashi's classic, 2D Symphony of the Night-style games have been MIA. The series' most celebrated developer left Konami last year, which means he's free to create anything he wants. Thankfully, Igarashi's hints point towards a spiritual successor to Symphony of the Night.



The Banner Saga 2

PLATFORM TBA

DEVELOPER Stoic

PUBLISHER Versus Evil

Last year, Stoic impressed with its debut game, The Banner Saga. The viking-themed adventure put the fate of a civilization in your hands, forcing you to build up an army to face off against stone humanoids called Dredge. It also brought new life to the strategy/RPG genre by providing choices on and off the battlefield. Stoic hasn't revealed much about the continuing journey in The Banner Saga 2, but expect haunting choices, bleak moments, and hard-fought victories.

BattleCry

PLATFORM PC

DEVELOPER BattleCry Studios

PUBLISHER Bethesda

BattleCry is a multiplayer mayhem title that embraces the team-based battle elements found in games like Team Fortress 2, but with a more medieval slant in terms of weaponry. Don't expect to see gunpowder or rocket launchers – swords and staves make up the core of the armament stew. The free-to-play title supports up to 32 players at once, allowing the battles to get impressively chaotic.



Battleborn

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PC

DEVELOPER Gearbox

PUBLISHER 2K Games

Battleborn looks like it will be a standout MOBA-style shooter, bringing one of PC's most popular genres into the spotlight. With team-based gameplay revolving around a host of characters that look and play differently and controls designed to take advantage of this FPS/MOBA mix, Battleborn is expected to bring a campaign and co-op to the table alongside the competitive multiplayer gameplay.

THE BIG QUESTIONS



WILL THE LAST GUARDIAN BE RELEASED?

The Last Guardian has resurfaced and disappeared several times since its announcement in 2009, and Sony executives are constantly asked to confirm its continued existence. The relative silence isn't necessarily an omen of doom; after so many false starts, The Last Guardian's reemergence needs to demonstrate the long wait is paying off – and that it's almost over. If Sony is smart, it will restore faith with two major announcements in 2015: a move to PS4, and a release date this holiday season.

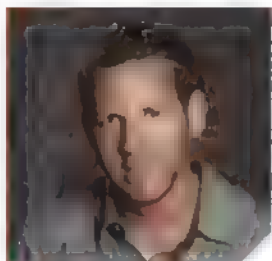


Below

PLATFORM Xbox One • PC
DEVELOPER Capybara Games
PUBLISHERS Capybara Games/
 Microsoft Studios

Through games like *Super Time Force* and *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*, Capy has earned its place as an indie developer worth following. Its upcoming roguelike has the player exploring a mysterious island and fighting to survive its many threats. The procedurally generated world is filled with monstrous shadows and gaping dungeons, and the sword-wielding protagonist looks tiny against the towering dungeon backdrop.

PEOPLE TO WATCH



CLIFF BLESZINSKI

It's been more than two years since game designer Cliff Bleszinski left Epic Games. During his two-decade tenure there, his *Unreal* and *Gears of War* franchises left massive marks on the shooter genre—which is why we were so glad to hear his departure from the industry was only temporary. In July 2014, he announced the formation of his new game studio, Boss Key Productions, as well as its first project. *BlueStreak* is a free-to-play arena-style PC shooter, and we expect Bleszinski will be filling us all in on the rest of the details this year.

Cuphead

PLATFORM Xbox One • PC
DEVELOPER Studio MDHR
PUBLISHER Studio MDHR

The charming 1930s' cartoon style of *Cuphead* captured gamers' attention as soon as footage splashed up on the big screen at last year's Microsoft E3 press conference. Beyond the beautiful animation techniques at play, *Cuphead* promises to offer an unusual twist on classic run-and-gun action by focusing exclusively on one boss fight after another. Along with the option for cooperative play, MDHR's debut is shaping up as one of the most intriguing Indies of 2015. Read our in-depth feature about the game on p. 46.

Darkest Dungeon

PLATFORM PS4 • Vita • PC • Mac
DEVELOPER Red Hook Studios
PUBLISHER Red Hook Studios

This deliciously dark gothic roguelike brings with it a distinct visual style and some interesting gameplay elements outside the norm for a dungeon-crawling RPG. Your team of heroes has to contend with the weight of insanity and other ailments as they progress, not to mention the tides of monsters and foes, adding an additional layer of management considerations to every encounter.



Dead Island 2

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PC
DEVELOPER Yager Development
PUBLISHER Deep Silver

While Techland is busy working on *Dying Light*, developer Yager is picking up the reins for *Dead Island 2*. This continuation of the post-apocalyptic zombie co-op game takes place in the quarantined state of California. Improvised weapons like electric machetes return, along with multiplayer that now accommodates up to eight zombie killers.

THE BIG QUESTIONS



WILL THIS BE THE LAST GASP OF THE LAST-GEN?

We've already seen the previous generation of hardware being phased out by publishers and developers. Looking at the game release schedule for the year, there aren't many big-name titles coming for the last-gen systems, and some that are - like Metal Gear Solid V - are not newly announced titles. The good news is online platforms like Xbox Live and PSN make it easier for the last-gen systems to continue to host a stream of indie games.



The Division

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PC

DEVELOPERS Ubisoft Massive/Ubisoft Reflections/Ubisoft Red Storm

PUBLISHER Ubisoft

In this new-gen open world third person shooter, the United States is reeling from the effects of an outbreak. Our nation's defenses proved to do little against the threat, and our society has fallen into ruin in less than a week. You're among the survivors who work to pick up the pieces, fighting to hold on to any semblance of order. Or, you can choose to look out for yourself, scavenging the rubble and trying to eke out just another day. Whichever route you take, you can be confident of one thing: You won't be alone.

EverQuest Next

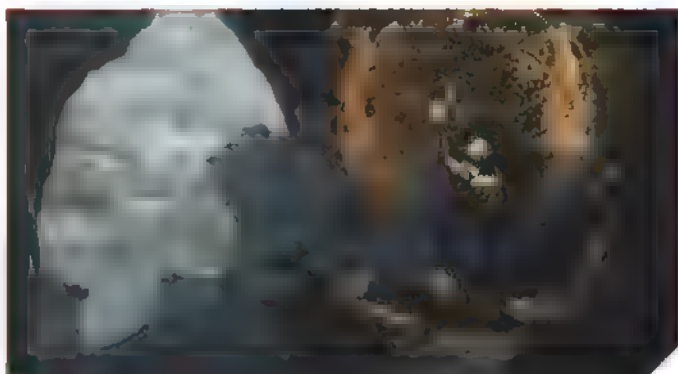
PLATFORM PS4 • PC

DEVELOPER Sony Online Entertainment

PUBLISHER Sony Online Entertainment

The world of Norrath returns. With Landmark paving the way for the giant MMORPG release of EverQuest Next, the game promises to bring new experiences to the genre with emergent A.I. and an ever shifting world that will turn out differently on each server based on special events. On one server, goblins may take over, on another, they may have been beaten back and never developed into a threat.

DEVELOPERS TO WATCH



BIOWARE

Despite the recent release of Dragon Age: Inquisition, don't expect BioWare to fade into the background in the coming months. A new Mass Effect project is well into development, expanding on the universe of the previous games (but without focusing on Commander Shepard). The developer also has a brand new IP in the works, though it is still in the early phases. Reports indicate that Shadow Realms, BioWare Austin's 4v1 online title, is going back to the drawing board, but fans can eagerly await news on the other two titles.



Everybody's Gone to the Rapture

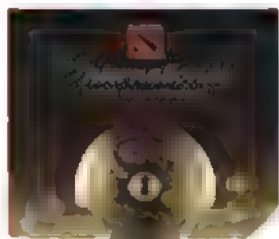
PLATFORM PS4

DEVELOPERS The Chinese Room, Sony Santa Monica

PUBLISHER Sony Computer Entertainment

Indie developer The Chinese Room is building on its narrative-driven adventure game Dear Esther with Everybody's Gone To The Rapture. Like its predecessor, Rapture focuses on story, detailing the lives of six characters during the apocalypse in the game's open world. Rapture also features more player interaction than its predecessor, allowing you to affect the world and events as the narrative unravels. Sony's Santa Monica studio is supporting The Chinese Room in development, and as such Rapture is now a PS4 exclusive.

THE BIG QUESTIONS



WHAT'S NEXT FOR ESPORTS?

With eSports prize pools catapulting to insane heights in 2014, and Dota 2's International commanding a purse of over \$10.9 million, things are looking on pace for an even more amazing 2015. With Smite's 2015 World Championship boasting a purse of over \$2.5 million and ESPN likely to grab Dota 2 again for its International, eSports will be captain of enormous prize pools and mainstream attention. With all the buzz and money, it's easy to see this being yet another huge year for eSports, featuring watchable, team-oriented excitement.

Firewatch

PLATFORMS PC • Mac • Linux

DEVELOPER Campo Santo

PUBLISHER Campo Santo

The talented team at Campo Santo, which consists of people who have worked on games like Telltale's The Walking Dead, Mark of the Ninja, and Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare, is set to release its first game this year. Firewatch is a beautiful mystery game set in the wilderness of Wyoming. Using the person on the other end of your walkie talkie as your only link to civilization, you must make careful choices as you progress through the story or risk losing your lifeline.

The Flame in the Flood

PLATFORM PC • Mac

DEVELOPER The Molasses Flood

PUBLISHER The Molasses Flood

Following Game Informer's exclusive feature on the game, Molasses Flood exceeded its Kickstarter goal, raising over \$250,000 for development of the evocative survival game. The team is now hard at work crafting its procedurally generated river journey and recently announced that they have a playable, internal alpha version complete. Molasses Flood hopes to complete the game by year's end; we can't wait to see how it turns out.



Fortnite

PLATFORMS PC

DEVELOPER Epic Games

PUBLISHER Epic Games

Building your fortress and defending it is the name of the game with Fortnite, the upcoming survival title from Epic Games. The original developer behind the Gears of War franchise will be carrying its cooperative roots into Fortnite, with players working together to fortify the base by day, then defending it from a zombie onslaught together by night. Scavenging loot will be a key mechanic of Fortnite, and Epic Games promises tons to look for and discover.



Galak-Z: The Dimensional

PLATFORM PS4 • Vita • PC

DEVELOPER 17-BIT

PUBLISHER 17-BIT

This procedurally generated space-based sci-fi shooter is part of the new era of roguelike games, allowing players to pick it up easily while also providing significant challenges and room for growth from playthrough to playthrough. While working through various tech options, players will attempt to survive in the futuristic, anime-inspired levels.

DEVELOPERS TO WATCH



BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Blizzard had an incredible year in 2014 with the launch of Hearthstone, a Diablo III expansion that corrected many of the major problems with the original title, and a World of Warcraft expansion. Moving into 2015, Heroes of the Storm and Overwatch will round out Blizzard's expansive offerings, allowing players to experience a refined take on almost any genre under a single developer's flag. On top of new releases, questions about a possible World of Warcraft II and the future of StarCraft remain, as well as other Blizzard properties like Hearthstone and Diablo.

Halo 5: Guardians

PLATFORM Xbox One

DEVELOPER 343 Industries

PUBLISHER Microsoft Studios

Many gamers have already gotten their first taste of Halo 5 with the recent public multi-player beta (see p. 78), but that small slice of game certainly doesn't represent the grander scope of what's on the way in the final release. A new engine fuels the game's move to an exclusive Xbox One release. The campaign focuses on a missing Master Chief and a new hero in the mix sent to track him down. Expect some big muscle behind Halo 5's release – Microsoft is undoubtedly hanging a lot of Xbox One's hopes on the success of the next chapter in its sci-fi epic.

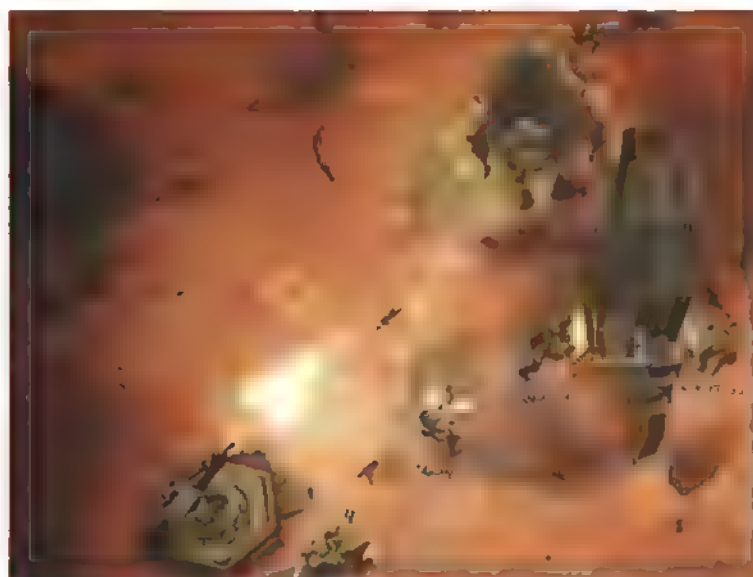


PEOPLE TO WATCH



KEN LEVINE

He began 2014 as the creative director of Irrational Games, but Ken Levine made waves when he announced the dissolution of the studio (which was known for well-loved games like System Shock 2, BioShock, BioShock Infinite). What is Levine's next project? Hopefully 2015 gives us some answers. He is working with a smaller team on downloadable, replayable, narrative-driven experiences. Beyond that, details are scarce, though Levine acknowledges that whatever the project is, it will require significant development time.



Heldivers

PLATFORM PS4 • PS3 • Vita

DEVELOPER Arrowhead Game Studios

PUBLISHER Sony Computer Entertainment

Unlike most twin-stick shooters, you can't mindlessly blast your way through Heldivers. The top-down action puts an emphasis on strategy, and the four player co-op features friendly fire, so you'll have to think before you shoot. You have to coordinate your team's weapons, perks, and abilities, as the procedurally generated levels and missions prevent tackling the game through rote memorization. Thankfully, cross-play will let squads team up across all three Sony platforms.



Heroes of the Storm

PLATFORM PC • Mac

DEVELOPER Blizzard Entertainment

PUBLISHER Blizzard Entertainment

Blizzard's take on the MOBA is poised to shine with its stable of established IPs battling it out on a variety of different maps, each with their own distinct style and objectives. With games that take only around 15-20 minutes, legendary characters facing off (Thrall and Jaina teaming up to take on Diablo – that's pretty hard to beat!), and gameplay that removes the burden of knowledge associated with the MOBA genre, this accessible brawler looks like a real contender for both casual and competitive play.



Homefront: The Revolution

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PC
DEVELOPERS Crytek UK/Deep Silver Dambuster
PUBLISHER Deep Silver

The Homefront sequel has survived the collapse of original publisher THQ and the troubled finances of original developer Crytek UK. Now under Deep Silver's wing, the game gives players a chance to see what life under North Korean "occupation" might look like. The action moves to Philadelphia, away from the generic Colorado setting of the first game. Philly was the home of revolutionaries before, and it's clear that a similar uprising will be simmering in this alternate version of the city.

Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number

PLATFORM PS4 • PS3 • Vita
 PC • Mac • Linux
DEVELOPER Dennaton Games
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital

The neon filled, blood-soaked streets of Miami are on display once again in Dennaton's follow-up to the violent and surreal twitch-based shooter that first put the team on the map. The second installment continues the story by following multiple protagonists and interlocking stories, from a set of copycat killers to a detective, and even a crime writer chronicling the murderous events of the story.

Hyper Light Drifter

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U
 PC • Vita • Ouya
DEVELOPER Heart Machine
PUBLISHER Heart Machine

Some indie games hide uninteresting gameplay with a slathering of pixelated graphics. Hyper Light Drifter's visuals may hearken back to a retro age, but the game skillfully blends adventure with precise action. Think of an SNES era Zelda with less forgiving combat, and you're on the right track. Heart Machine has created a familiar yet unsettlingly weird world, with ancient artifacts and mysterious figures. The journey won't be easy, but it will be rewarding.

DEVELOPERS TO WATCH



EIDOS MONTREAL

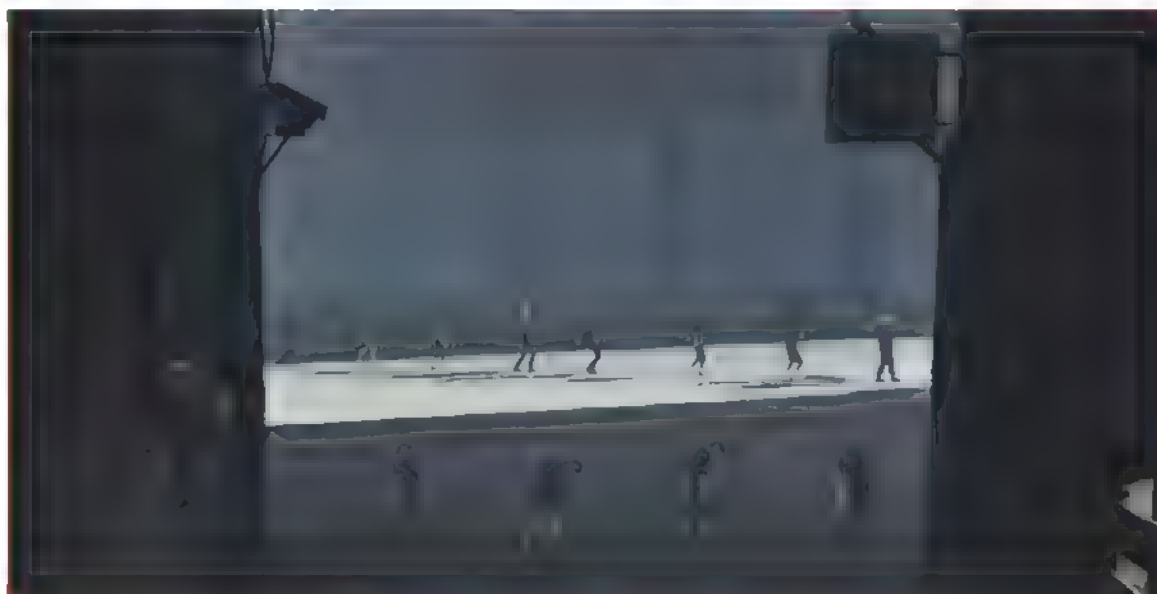
Eidos' Canadian studio nailed the 2013 Tomb Raider reboot and is coming back for more with Rise of the Tomb Raider. Flip to our cover story on page 34 for all of the exciting new details. On top of that, Eidos also announced way back in 2013 that it's hard at work on Deus Ex Universe, a series of games on new-gen consoles, phones, and tablets to follow up 2011's Deus Ex: Human Revolution. After all that time, it would be great to see a trailer at E3 this summer.

PEOPLE TO WATCH



PATRICE DÉSILETS

As one of the central creative minds behind the birth of the blockbuster Assassin's Creed franchise, Désilets has not released a new game for years, thanks to a very messy separation, forced reconciliation, and final break-up with Ubisoft. Near the end of 2014, we finally got the first inklings of what the talented developer has been up to. His new studio, Panache Digital Games, is working on a "historical-action-survival" game that is said to be on a triple-A scale. Here's hoping 2015 is when we'll finally hear more from this long-silent creative voice.



Inside

PLATFORM Xbox One
DEVELOPER Playdead
PUBLISHER TBA

Thanks to a haunting art style and creative puzzles, Playdead's atmospheric indie hit Limbo wowed critics and gamers alike. The developer's follow-up, Inside, is shrouded in mystery, but the arresting announcement trailer offers an idea of the adventure to come. Players once again help a young protagonist traverse a variety of bleak environments, but the fluid animations and intriguing scenarios give Inside its own unique feel. Xbox owners will enjoy a window of timed exclusivity before Inside comes to other platforms later in 2015.

Just Cause 3

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PC
DEVELOPER Avalanche Studios
PUBLISHER Square Enix

We introduced Just Cause 3 to the world in our December cover story, and Avalanche Studios has remained quiet ever since. In case you missed it, Rico Rodriguez returns to his homeland of Medici to free it from the tyranny of General Di Ravello with a new wingsuit, multiple grapples, improved parachute controls, and bigger and better explosions than ever before. Keep your eyes peeled for the debut trailer, which we're hoping hits before the summer.



King's Quest

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • PC
DEVELOPER The Odd Gentlemen
PUBLISHER Sierra Entertainment

The developer behind The M sadventures of P.B. Winterbottom is taking a crack at one of the most beloved adventure games series of all time. King Graham returns for an epic quest that spans his entire life, from boyhood to old age. The journey is all-new, but includes nods to memorable scenes like Graham sneaking into a dragon's lair. Even better, you can still watch Graham die in unexpected ways with out worry about having to "save early and save often."

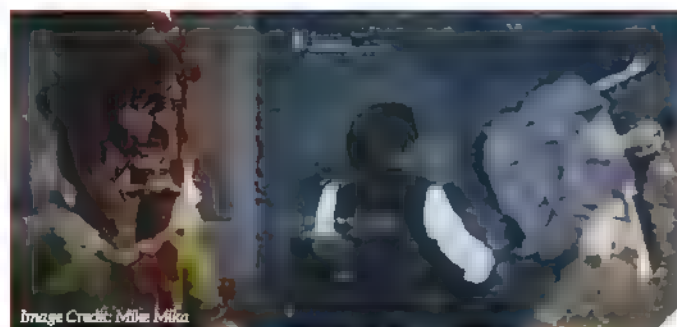


Killing Floor 2

PLATFORM PS4 • PC
DEVELOPER Tripwire Interactive
PUBLISHER Tripwire Interactive

Killing Floor first surfaced in 2005 as a co-op FPS mod for Unreal Tournament 2004. Eventually, Tripwire Interactive (also known for the Red Orchestra series) polished it up and released it as a full game. After years of updates and community growth, Killing Floor sold over 2.5 million copies. The sequel is headed to console for the first time with improvements to depth, features, and gore.

THE BIG QUESTIONS



WILL PUBLISHERS LEARN TO LAUNCH GAMES CORRECTLY?

The problem of broken launches will probably remain for the time being. With fiscal deadlines and the convenience of post-release patches hard to ignore, it's likely companies will keep trying to push development up to launch day and beyond, thus inviting problems. Among this holiday season's spate of broken launches, the companies involved were contrite, but did not signal a wholesale change of practice. Money and time solve the problem, but those two elements are always in short supply in game development.



The Legend of Zelda Wii U

PLATFORM Wii U
DEVELOPER Nintendo
PUBLISHER Nintendo

Much of what is exciting about the new Zelda is shrouded in mystery. We don't know the game's subtitle, what kind of items Link will be using, or what other characters will appear. What we do know, however, is the game features an open world, looks great in high-definition, and it won't demand motion-controlled combat with the Wii Remote – all things worth getting excited about. Hopefully we'll learn more about Link's next adventure at this year's E3.

The Long Dark

PLATFORM PC • Mac
DEVELOPER Hinterland Studio
PUBLISHER Hinterland Studio

Hinterland Studio is a new indie developer featuring talent that's worked on blockbusters like Far Cry 3, Morrowind, and Red Faction. Its first game, The Long Dark, is in the blossoming survival genre, and offers a chilling, eerily quiet power in its current early access beta. Right now, it's largely a formless experience that ends with you dying of starvation or exposure. Hinterland plans to add a more full-featured single-player campaign this year, making this a game to watch.

THE BIG QUESTIONS



IS THIS THE YEAR FOR CONSUMER VR?

With Oculus Rift, Sony's Project Morpheus, Valve's mystery VR headset, and a host of other contenders, virtual reality appears to be the next big boom in gaming. We've seen some very impressive technology and trade show demonstrations over the past few years, but many hope 2015 is when VR will actually get into the hands of consumers. Sony or Oculus seem the most likely to close the deal this year, but it will be interesting to see how much the units cost – an all-important detail neither company has discussed yet.



Mad Max

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PC
DEVELOPER Avalanche Studios
PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

Mad Max made his debut back at E3 2013, but he's gone dark since then. With the release of the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* this year, it's a perfect time for the hero to crawl out of the wasteland. We're hoping Just Cause developer Avalanche has taken that time to give the game the split polish the title deserves. Based on what we know, players can expect carnage at the wheel, Batman-style combat on foot, and a blasted out world populated with some of the scariest freaks around.

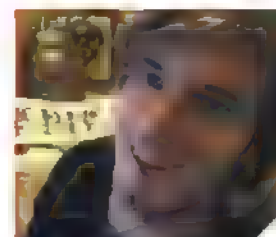


Mario Maker

PLATFORM Wii U
DEVELOPER Nintendo
PUBLISHER Nintendo

It's an idea so obvious, it seems even Nintendo is surprised it didn't decide to pursue it sooner. With Mario Maker, budding designers can craft their own Mario levels, choosing from a collection of Mario templates and art styles. Creating levels is as easy as drawing out paths on the Wii U's touch screen, and Nintendo could even dip into its non-Mario franchises to offer more creation tools. It's Mario Paint for a new generation.

PEOPLE TO WATCH



FELIX "PEWDIEPIE" KJELLBERG

Few people - gamers or otherwise - had a bigger 2014 than Swedish YouTube personality PewDiePie. In addition to becoming the most viewed YouTube channel, PewDiePie appeared on a pair of South Park episodes centered on Let's Plays, and was even used by Pitbull to promote his New Year's Eve 2015 show. With rumors swirling of PewDiePie starting his own network, in addition to more and more attention shoring on him both in and out of gaming circles, 2015 could be a huge year for this celebrity.

Mighty No. 9

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U • PS3 • 360 • 3DS • Vita • PC • Mac • Linux
DEVELOPERS Concept, Inti Creates
PUBLISHER Concept

Capcom has been stubbornly sitting on the Mega Man license for years, but that's not stopping series co-creator Kenji Inafune from making a spiritual successor. The successful Kickstarter project is coming along nicely, with vibrant colors, responsive gameplay, and a unique combo mechanic that ratchets up the speed and urgency of Mega Man-style action.

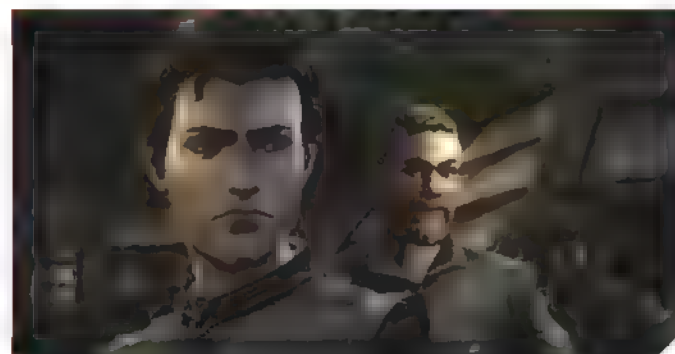


Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • PC
DEVELOPER Kojima Productions
PUBLISHER Konami

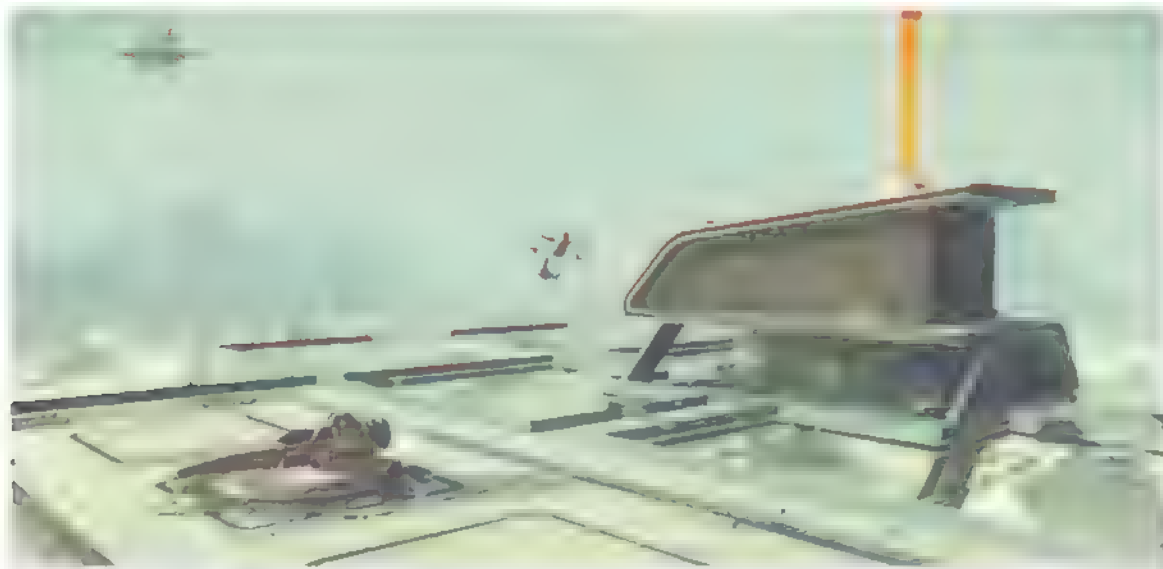
In 2014, Kojima Productions released MGS V: Ground Zeroes, a brief prologue to The Phantom Pain. Ground Zeroes' goal of igniting our appetites for the proper MGS sequel worked. The Phantom Pain promises open-world exploration from Africa to the Middle East while expanding the mysterious and sinister story revolving around Big Boss. Did we mention you can also steal goats using balloons?

DEVELOPERS TO WATCH



TELLTALE GAMES

Telltale has been running full steam ahead since its success with The Walking Dead. Right now, it's working on episodic content with its Game of Thrones and Borderlands licenses, but it recently announced an interesting new venture: Minecraft. Telltale's projects are becoming more unpredictable and exciting with each announcement. Can you imagine which license it will tackle next? Telltale is definitely taking risks, heightening our anticipation for its next announcement.

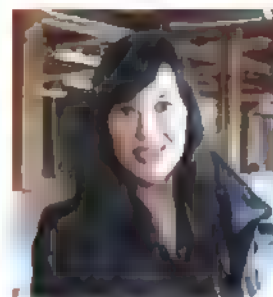


No Man's Sky

PLATFORM PS4 • PC
DEVELOPER Hello Games
PUBLISHER Hello Games

No Man's Sky uses sophisticated procedural generation to create a nearly infinite galaxy to explore with an unspoken mystery to discover in the center. It headlined our January Science Fiction issue and made waves with our month's worth of online content. We dug into the economy, upgrades, robotic enemies, the enormous galactic map, and all of the random questions bouncing around fans' heads. Hello Games has committed to a 2015 release, so the potential never-ending development cycle on the ambitious project has a deadline to hit.

PEOPLE TO WATCH



JADE RAYMOND

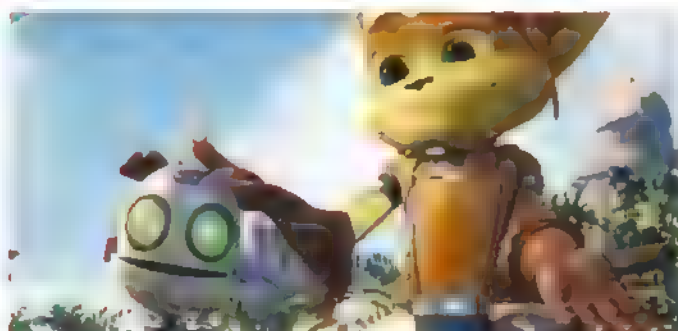
Raymond was a rising star at Ubisoft for her production work on the Assassin's Creed franchise and other major series, and subsequently became the managing director of a new Ubisoft branch based in Toronto. It came as a surprise last October when Ubisoft announced Raymond's departure from the company. With no word yet on whether Raymond has plans to remain in the industry, we're left to wonder about whether she'll bring her production talents to another gaming company.

Overwatch

PLATFORM PC • Mac
DEVELOPER Blizzard Entertainment
PUBLISHER Activision

Overwatch is a team shooter (like Valve's Team Fortress 2). The game features two teams of six players, with a dozen heroes announced so far. Players are encouraged to switch characters after death and tinker with the best team makeup in this fast and funous first-person shooter that also layers on some personality through vibrant artwork and hero personalities via voiceovers. The beta is happening early this year, so you can get your hands on Overwatch soon.

DEVELOPERS TO WATCH



INSOMNIAC GAMES

It's been a rough few years for Insomniac; the Resistance series sputtered to a halt, experiments like Outernauts and Fuse failed, and its best new property in years – the excellent Sunset Overdrive – didn't sell well. For these reasons, 2015 is pivotal for Insomniac and its classic franchise Ratchet & Clank. With a new animated feature film and a reboot of the game series on the way in 2015, this could be a big comeback year for Insomniac and its favorite Lombax/robot duo.



Persona 5

PLATFORM PS4 • PS3
DEVELOPER Atlus
PUBLISHER Atlus

Atlus' fantastic Persona series has made a name for itself; the franchise has exploded with its own spin-offs, such as fighting games and an upcoming rhythm game. However, RPG fans haven't received a new mainline entry since 2008's Persona 4. Atlus has kept Persona 5 under wraps, but we do know this entry is set in a modern-day city and the main conflict involves characters feeling restrained by the rules of society. The series always has relatable dilemmas and unique characters, so we can't wait to see what's in store.

PGA Tour

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One

DEVELOPER EA Tiburon

PUBLISHER EA Sports

EA Sports' golf franchise is making its new-gen debut without Tiger Woods, but its horizon is not limited. The game uses Battlefield's Frostbite 3 engine, which not only makes surroundings look great, but cuts out loading from hole to hole and enables players to access more of the environment. This will come in handy when finding shortcuts through some of the fantasy-based holes – including one that uses elements of Battlefield 4's Paracel Storm map.

THE BIG QUESTIONS



WILL VALVE'S STEAM MACHINES SURFACE?

Valve is moving forward after delaying the Steam Machines initiative into 2015. The company says the machines will be "front and center" at GDC this March, and there is talk that the controller's design is finalized. These are positive signs for the Steam-centric, living room-friendly initiative, but the wild card is Valve itself. The company reserves the right to take its time bringing products to market when it feels ready, and so far the Steam Machines program has not shown itself to be different.



Quantum Break

PLATFORM Xbox One

DEVELOPER Remedy Entertainment

PUBLISHER Microsoft Studios

When you look into Remedy's history, Quantum Break's intriguing premise becomes a little more understandable. The action game marries the time manipulation powers of Remedy's former Max Payne series with the strong narrative focus of Alan Wake. Story is so important that Quantum Break is being supplemented with a live-action television show, which will impact the game's story and vice versa. Whether Remedy can pull off the blend of entertainment remains to be seen, but the project promises to be unique.

Rainbow Six: Siege

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PC

DEVELOPER Ubisoft Montreal

PUBLISHER Ubisoft

Rising from the ashes of Rainbow Six Patriots is Siege, where players join five-person terrorist/counter-terrorist teams tasked with the planning and execution of hostage situations in three minute rounds. Terrorists can fortify their defenses and move hostages, while counter-terrorists have technology on their side. Environments are destructible and situations are fluid, so thinking on your feet is important to success. Siege also has a single-player mode where you play as the assault team.



DEVELOPERS TO WATCH



BLACK TUSK STUDIOS

Vancouver-based Black Tusk was announced as the new Gears of War developer early in 2014, but the studio has remained quiet ever since. Former Epic Games' executive producer and director of production Rod Fergusson joined the team, helping to assure continuity for the long-running, machismo-laden shooter. After a long silence, it's a good bet we'll get some word about the new adventures of those muscle-bound COG soldiers before the year is out.



Rime

PLATFORM PS4

DEVELOPER Tequila Works

PUBLISHER Sony Computer Entertainment

After creating 2012's Deadlight for Xbox 360 and PC, Spanish developer Tequila Works has brought its latest project exclusively to Sony's console. A far cry from the grim tone of the team's previous game, Rime follows a young boy on a sunny island trying to solve puzzles, survive threats, and break a mysterious curse. The mix of Ico and Wind Waker-era Zelda visuals and gameplay has us desperate for new intel. Rime doesn't have a release date yet, but after two Gamescom showings it seems feasible development could wrap up this year.



Rise of the Tomb Raider

PLATFORM Xbox One • 360

DEVELOPER Crystal Dynamics

PUBLISHER Microsoft Studios

Crystal Dynamics' reboot of Tomb Raider was a big success by any measure. By reviving Lara Croft as a more believable and empathetic character, her death-defying adventures took on increased narrative weight. The upcoming sequel takes the next step, finding Lara dealing with the aftermath of her harrowing island adventure, and finally putting the focus of play on what the title suggests: the raiding of tombs. We were lucky enough to take a deep dive into the new game this month in our exclusive cover story; check out the full scoop on p. 34.



Splatoon

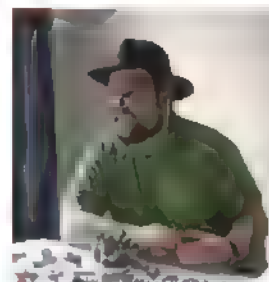
PLATFORM Wii U

DEVELOPER Nintendo

PUBLISHER Nintendo

The multiplayer shooter is the most popular (and financially successful) genre in gaming, and Nintendo is finally ready to try it out. Splatoon features paint instead of bullets, and challenges players to shoot the environment instead of each other. It's a competitive experience unlike any other, and also features a brand new collection of characters — something we don't often see from Nintendo.

PEOPLE TO WATCH



MARKUS "NOTCH" PERSSON

Notch had already achieved success beyond most people's wildest dream, and then he departed Mojang with a significant portion of the \$2.5 billion Microsoft paid for the studio he cofounded. In 2015, the Minecraft creator begins the next chapter in his career. Based on his farewell post on Mojang's site, his future will not include large-scale blockbuster development. Whether it's his own project or helping fledgling developers, expect Notch to go back to his roots as a pioneering programmer.

Star Citizen

PLATFORM PC

DEVELOPER Cloud Imperium Games

PUBLISHER Cloud Imperium Games

Chris Roberts (of Wing Commander fame) and his team at Cloud Imperium Games will continue to release features in 2015 for this ambitious space simulation, which remains in pre-release status. Players will eventually band together to man giant ships that require a crew, fly out solo to battle and trade, and exist in a massive online universe together where pirates and plunder lurk around every planetary corner. With over \$5 million in funding, Star Citizen could put the space sim back on the map in a big way.



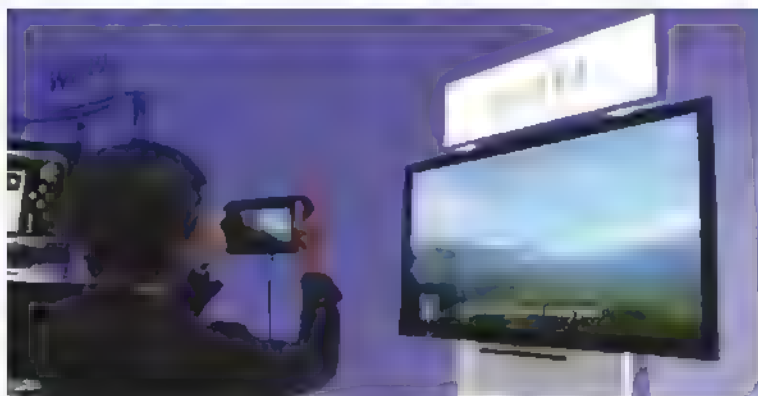
StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void

PLATFORM PC • Mac

DEVELOPER Blizzard Entertainment

PUBLISHER Blizzard Entertainment

The final act of the StarCraft II trilogy offers players a conclusion to the ongoing story, along with a Protoss-oriented campaign and multiplayer modes and features that make the RTS more approachable. With Avatar mode, new players can learn to play alongside a seasoned veteran, or two more experienced players can team up to manage scouting, resource gathering, and combat in new ways. Legacy of the Void is a standalone product, so you won't need previous installments in order to play.



Star Fox

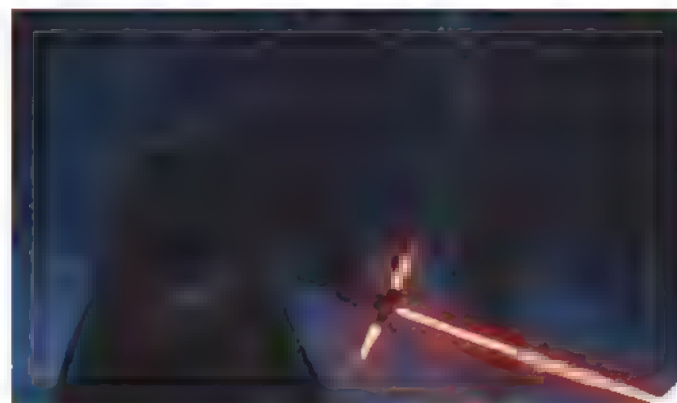
PLATFORM Wii U

DEVELOPER Nintendo

PUBLISHER Nintendo

Nintendo is planning on bringing Fox McCloud out of retirement for a new entry on the Wii U. Fox will be able to fly his Arwing and seamlessly transform into a tank during certain sequences. Pilots can control the game either with their GamePad's analog sticks or motion control. The game was very early in development and looked admittedly rough the last we saw of it, but we're hoping Fox gets the new grand adventure he deserves.

THE BIG QUESTIONS



THE YEAR OF STAR WARS?

If Disney plays its cards right, it'll be hard to walk two steps without hearing about Star Wars in 2015. Along with the theatrical release of *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens*, EA's *Star Wars: Battlefront* is shaping up to be one of the year's most anticipated games. Star Wars characters and worlds will likely be included in this year's *Disney Infinity*. We also expect to see a handful of Star Wars games hitting exclusively on mobile.

Star Wars: Battlefront

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PC

DEVELOPER DICE

PUBLISHER Electronic Arts

The highly anticipated reboot of the *Star Wars: Battlefront* series will serve as the first console release since *Battlefront II* appeared on PlayStation 2 and Xbox. With Battlefield devs EA DICE taking over the series following the fall of LucasArts, this entry is said to mix various elements - old and new - to create a new vision for the series. *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens* hits theaters this holiday season, giving DICE a golden opportunity to ride that wave of hype and deliver an excellent Star Wars experience to an enormous audience.





Street Fighter V

PLATFORM PS4 • PC
DEVELOPER Capcom
PUBLISHER Capcom

One of the biggest announcements to come out of the PlayStation Experience in 2014 was that Street Fighter V would not be appearing on any console other than PlayStation 4. This news effectively propelled the PS4 to become the flagship console for many fighting game fans. Improved graphics, more involved stages, and PC/PS4 cross-platform play are likely just a small part of what is sure to be a long list of improvements over the beloved Street Fighter IV.



The Tomorrow Children

PLATFORM PS4
DEVELOPER Q Games
PUBLISHER Sony Computer Entertainment

The Tomorrow Children is set in a reimagined future ravaged by the after effects of a 1960's Russian experiment gone wrong. Early footage teases third person combat with a bevy of guns to shoot down robotic spiders and dinosaur-like creatures. Resource gathering and crafting are front and center – you can even create buildings. The collaborative experience is already being compared to Minecraft.

Torment: Tides of Numenera

PLATFORM PC • Mac
DEVELOPER inXile Entertainment
PUBLISHER inXile Entertainment

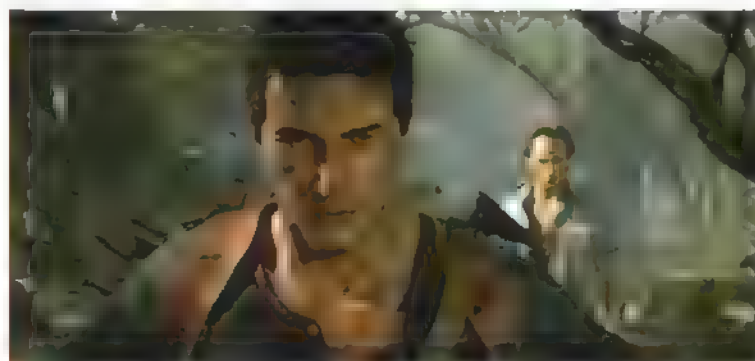
With the old-school PC RPG coming back into focus in 2014, 2015 looks to keep the trend going with this spiritual successor to the classic Planescape: Torment. Brian Fargo and company will be exploring one of the most beloved RPG backdrops here, with plenty of emphasis on character development, meaningful choices, and extensive dialogue trees allowing players to dictate the paths they take through the title, with combat taking second seat to the expansive, evolving story.

THE BIG QUESTIONS



WILL NINTENDO ANNOUNCE A NEW CONSOLE?

In December, Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto stated that Nintendo was in the early stages of working on a new console. He also said his next big Mario game might be headed for that console, not the Wii U. The company's new "quality-of-life" initiative also has yet to bear much fruit. It's hard to say where this is all going, but given Nintendo's history, it will be like nothing else we've seen.



Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

PLATFORM PS4
DEVELOPER Naughty Dog
PUBLISHER Sony Computer Entertainment

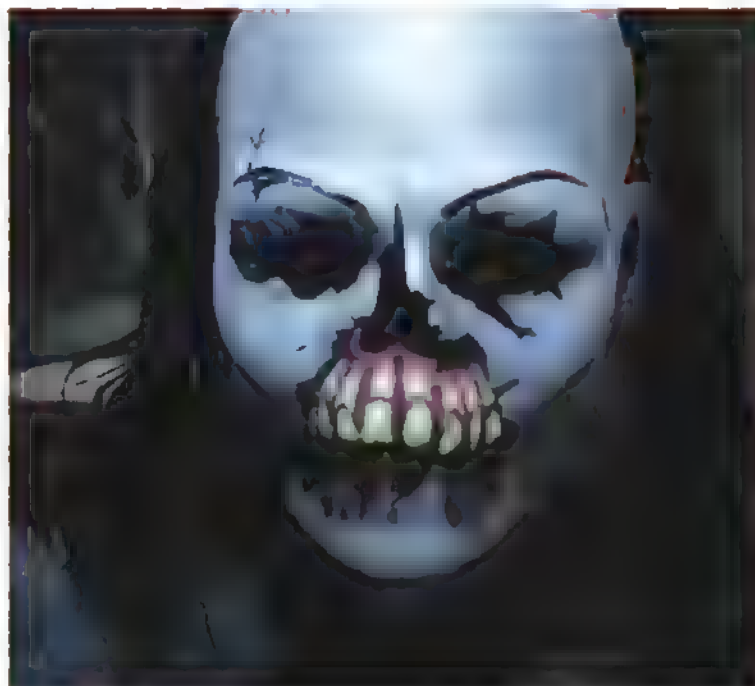
Our last issue gave you a mother lode of information on Naughty Dog's Uncharted 4: A Thief's End. However, we don't know everything about what's sure to be one of the year's biggest games. What we've seen so far is definitely in the tradition of previous games, but a lot of this will be globetrotting to various exotic locations with Nathan Drake and his brother Sam. Given the power of the PS4, we can't wait to see what grand set-piece moments Naughty Dog has cooked up. We also look forward to more information about the game's multiplayer component.

DEVELOPERS TO WATCH



GUERRILLA GAMES

Few developers have the potential to impress with technical know-how like Guerrilla Games. The Killzone games have been showpieces for the visual fidelity of Sony's systems for years, even if the series has failed to captivate players in the same way as other triple-A shooters have. The team has been working on a new IP for some years now, but no details have surfaced beyond the knowledge that the team is heading in an entirely new direction from its previous sci-fi shooter roots.



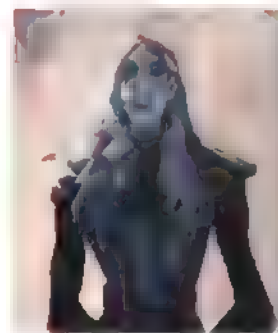
Until Dawn

PLATFORM PS4

DEVELOPER Supermassive Games

PUBLISHER Sony Computer Entertainment

Most horror movies are predictable. The killer splits up the group, then stalks after them and kills them one-by-one with macabre creativity. Until Dawn, originally developed as a PlayStation Move title, taps into all the possible outcomes a pack of hapless victims could endure while trapped in a creepy house. Will your favorite characters survive, or will your choices lead them to their doom?



MORE GAMES TO WATCH

There are dozens of additional games that might hit final release in 2015, but here's a list of 50 we're especially curious about.

- › Alienation
- › Armello
- › Behemoth Game Four
- › Cities: Skylines
- › Clockwork Empires
- › Crawl
- › Devil's Third
- › Disgaea 5
- › Drawn to Death
- › Dreadnought
- › Dungeons 2
- › Dungeon Defenders 2
- › EarthNight
- › The Escapists
- › Eve Valkyrie
- › Fable Legends
- › Galactic Civilizations III
- › Gang Beasts
- › Ghost Song
- › Gigantic
- › Grim Dawn
- › Heart Forth, Alicia
- › Hellblade
- › Hellraid
- › Heroes of Might & Magic VII
- › Hollowpoint
- › Kill Strain
- › Lovers in a Dangerous Spacetime
- › Mario vs. Donkey Kong
- › Massive Chalice
- › Mewgenics
- › Minecraft: Story Mode
- › Pillar
- › Return of the Obra Dinn
- › The Room Three
- › Salt and Sanctuary
- › Severed
- › Shadow Realms
- › Shroud of the Avatar
- › Soma
- › Superhot
- › Super Meat Boy Forever
- › Tales of Zestiria
- › Tearaway Unfolded
- › Toy Soldiers: War Chest
- › Titan Souls
- › Volume
- › Warhammer 40K: Eternal Crusade
- › World of Warships
- › Yakuza 5

The Witness

FORMAT PS4 • PC • iOS

DEVELOPER Thekla, Inc.

PUBLISHER Thekla, Inc.

The Witness is the latest game from Jonathan Blow, which should be enough to pique any gamer's interest. The Witness is definitely different from Braid, but not necessarily less compelling. You explore the landscape of an abandoned island from a first-person perspective, solving puzzle panels found in the structures and environment. These puzzles seem like simple mazes at first, but they become more complex as you dive into the island's mysteries.



Xenoblade Chronicles X

PLATFORM Wii U

DEVELOPER Monolith

PUBLISHER Nintendo

Xenoblade Chronicles for the Wii was one of the best role-playing games of the last generation. Now Monolith is back with a spiritual successor that promises to make even a bigger splash. Xenoblade Chronicles X houses a massive open world, controllable mechs, and new variations on its predecessor's stellar combat system. Monolith has proven its desire and ability to evolve the JRPG, and this title looks like another step toward that goal.

Yoshi's Woolly World

PLATFORM Wii U

DEVELOPER Good-Feel

PUBLISHER Nintendo

After creating Kirby's Epic Yarn in 2010, developer Good-Feel is familiar with yarn. It is hoping to do something different with Yoshi's Woolly World, however, despite using the same fuzzy string to craft its world and characters. The game takes full advantage of Nintendo's first HD console with impressive visuals and familiar Yoshi mechanics (eat enemies, create eggs) and offers co-op, something we've never been able to do in a Yoshi game.





Halo 5: Guardians

Turn and face the strange

» Platform
Xbox One

» Style
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(16-Player Online)

» Publisher
Microsoft Studios

» Developer
343 Industries

» Release
2015

If the beta for Halo 5: Guardians is any indication of what to expect from the future of Microsoft's favorite shooter, things are changing in Master Chief's universe.

Included as part of Halo: The Master Chief Collection, the Halo 5: Guardians multiplayer beta ran for three weeks, giving players an early peek at a collection of multiplayer maps, the new Breakout mode, and gameplay mechanics both new and familiar to Halo fans. » **Kyle Hilliard**

The Controls

Though not as dependent on aiming down the sights as shooters like Call of Duty, Halo 5's controls encourage players to pull the gun up to their eye and look down the reticle. This is the most jarring change to controlling a Spartan on the battlefield. Spartans also now have a dedicated sprint button (something Bungie's Halos never employed), are able to climb up previously inaccessible ledges, use a jetpack to float while aiming

in the air or get a burst of speed to quickly relocate, and use a difficult-to-execute mid-air ground slam.

It's not the Halo we're used to, but it has enough familiarity to give the game an undeniable Halo feel. Grenades function as they always have, your opponents can still take a healthy dose of bullets before dying in Slayer, and verticality and jumping still play major roles in the firefights.

The Modes

The beta offered two modes for players to sample: classic Team Slayer and the new Breakout.

Team Slayer is where Halo feels most familiar, even with the addition of ledge climbing and boosting from jetpacks. Halo 2's popular Midship map returns, allowing players to run around, get into scuffles, move in for melee kills, and strategically bounce grenades off corners.

Breakout mode constitutes Halo 5's most

dramatic new direction. Two teams of four players take on one another on a course best described as an *Ender's Game*-inspired paintball field of the future. Every player has one life and the rounds go quick. The first team to reach five victories wins the overall game. It's a new take on SWAT mode, encouraging headshots and limiting shields. In a way, it plays like the child of Halo and Counter Strike.

Breakout feels like 343's attempt at crafting an eSports-focused Halo mode, and even has the winning Spartans celebrating their victories with high-fives at the end of the match.

Our own reactions are mixed throughout the office, with some long-time fans decrying the radical changes to the Halo formula and others ready to embrace the new direction. Personally, I am hopeful for Halo 5's future. It's a different game than the shooter Bungie established, but with a new developer overseeing the franchise's direction, that's as it should be.



An epic showdown between the new Spartan Charge ability and rockets



The Professionals

Given the beta's spirit of professional competitive play, we spoke with current and former members of Optic Halo, a team of professional Halo players about the changes heading to Halo and their overall thoughts on the beta.

Michael "Flamesword" Chaves » "Sprint has always been questionable for Halo, but for the first time ever 343 Industries has made it work. If a player's shields are down and they're sprinting then shields will not return until they've stopped and they get a chance to recharge. This is an awesome new feature, as players can't abuse doing sprint rushes and getting away with it. It returns the gameplay back to the way Halo used to be: rewarding the better player for the smarter play.

Overall the beta is fun. It's very different from past Halos, but holds to its core components as an arena shooter."

Mason "Aries" Miller » "I enjoy finally playing a Halo where it feels difficult to shoot in. It has been a long time since I've noticed a skill gap just based off a player's ability to shoot in a game of Halo."

Clete "Assault" LoRusso » "To start, shooting and abilities are vastly improved in Halo 5. For instance, the sprint mechanics in the beta are superior to Halo's previous editions since shields do not recharge while running away from battles. Additionally, the booster pack definitely added to the skill gap in the game, and with the competitive skill ranking created by 343 Industries, it should be quite obvious the players on the top of the leaderboard utilize this tool effectively and efficiently.

However, I am worried about the game's weapon balance, map designs, and controller settings. Although it's possible they may not make it into competitive settings, Regret and its power weapon, the Hydra, have significant problems.

Regret has a diminished line of sight which limits team shooting – arguably a common occurrence in 343's map designs. The Hydra, which can potentially replace a rocket launcher in competitive play, is quite overpowered with its ability to lock onto targets from far away. As an example, I can lock onto someone from red sneaky on Regret and hit someone across the map after I lock-on by pointing the gun to the sky and watching the missiles chase after my target as they go behind protective barriers.

Overall, I'm mixed on Halo 5's beta, but I'm optimistic for the game's full release – as long as 343 can improve weapon balance and map design."

The all-new design for the Halo 5 rocket launcher



Guild Wars 2: Heart Of Thorns

The first expansion unveiled

» Platform
PC • Mac

» Style
Massively Multiplayer
Online Role-Playing

» Publisher
NCSoft

» Developer
ArenaNet

» Release Date
TBA

Guild Wars 2 is doing something developer ArenaNet did not originally expect: receiving a full expansion to go along with its constant Living World updates. Players are accustomed to receiving small content updates on a regular basis as the overarching story of the world progresses via the Living World philosophy, but Heart of Thorns will provide a glut of content in a single powerful punch.

This expansion includes a massive new area, a new advancement system for level-capped characters and accounts, a new class, new profession options for all existing classes with completely new skills and abilities, new world PVP options, a new PVP battleground, and guild halls for players to embrace their communities.

The crux of content that players explore takes place in the Heart of Maguuma, a layered three-tier jungle area that challenges players to explore their environments in new ways. The story provides a lead-in to the new area, full of dragons and an ongoing story arc all the way from the original Guild Wars. Players explore the zone on several levels, from the roots to the jungle floor to the canopy above. The new areas feature challenging group content alongside world events that have permanent impact, much like several of the massive Living World shifts that have occurred since release.

One of the keys to this expansion is character progression. Level-capped characters are able to continue developing through the use of mastery points, which are applied at the account level (so you won't have to earn them over and over if you have multiple level-80 characters). Mastery points are designed to give you specific advantages to tackle the new content in the expansion, advancing your roster of level-capped characters in new and interesting ways. For instance, you can hang

of the jungle, or to cut through the thick bark of tough enemies plaguing the zone. Outsiders of upgrades that only assist the player in expansion content, these masteries also help players in core game content, allowing them to build and equip legendary weapons.

And what would an expansion be without new classes? Not only does Heart of Thorns introduce a completely new core class with the Revenant – a heavy armor archetype that allows companions to tread through the mist and grants protective boons – but all of the existing classes have new specializations they can delve into at level 80. A ranger, for example, could opt to become a druid and learn a completely new set of skills. These new specializations can be swapped back

and forth freely; you won't lose your old class to start exploring a new one. While all the new specializations require a character to be level 80 to begin exploring, players can play immediately as the Revenant at level 1.

World-versus-World PVP combat is pushing out new incentives for players to hold onto captured territory, making retaining a keep more rewarding. New resources and boons are associated with this defense-oriented push that should get players more interested in the value of their holdings. In the standard PVP area, a new kind of battle called Stronghold is offered – a sort of small-scale iteration of what we see on the World versus-World front. Stronghold pits teams against each other in fortress-based combat



that involves one team succeeding with the siege of the opposing base and the dispatching of the NPC enemy guild lord.

Heart of Thorns also brings an oft-requested feature to Guild Wars 2 with the Guild Hall. These areas serve as social and community hubs, and while details are not available yet, you can imagine that many cool perks for guilds in terms of decoration, achievements, and other things are likely to be included.

While many more details are yet to come, players will have their first chance to play Guild Wars 2: Heart of Thorns at PAX East 2015. Seeing what any big expansion brings to a MMORPG is always interesting, and Heart of Thorns looks like a major milestone for Guild Wars 2. » Daniel Tack



Battlefield: Hardline

Not your typical game of cops and robbers

» **Platform**

PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**

1-Player Shooter
(64-Player Online
[PS4, Xbox One, PC])
(24-Player Online
[PS3, 360])

» **Publisher**

Electronic Arts

» **Developer**

Visceral Games

» **Release Date**

March 17



Several titles over the past twelve months have worked to revitalize the first-person shooter genre, but *Battlefield: Hardline* is about providing players with a fresh take on an already established franchise. Taking the focus away from the literal battlefield and shifting the spotlight to the figurative one that exists between law enforcement and criminals, *Battlefield: Hardline* is the biggest change the series has ever seen.

The team-centric online gameplay that has made the *Battlefield* franchise so popular remains, but with a greater emphasis on civilian vehicles and modes based on quick strikes. Steve Papoutsis, the game's executive producer, believes *Hardline* is the fastest *Battlefield* yet. Though tanks are gone from *Hardline*, traversing the nine maps included in the game won't be a problem, as zip lines, grapping hooks, motorcycles, and sports cars will play major roles in this reinvented multiplayer experience.

Multiplayer in *Battlefield: Hardline* combines old and new modes to create an overall suite that is suited to the cops and robbers-themed game. In addition to series staples Conquest and Team Deathmatch, *Hardline* includes Heist,

a mode tasking the criminal team to steal money from armored trucks throughout the map, Blood Money, where cops and criminals are dashing for the same pot of money, Hotwire, a unique take on capture the flag in the context of a sprawling high-speed chase, and Rescue, which thrusts cops and criminals into an intense hostage scenario.

Battlefield: Hardline also includes the newly announced Crosshair mode, an asymmetrical competitive mode with a focus on the eSports community. "There are two teams, and one of the teams has a VIP—basically an informant—and as the law enforcement team, you're trying to protect that informant and escort him out of the map. As the criminal side, you're trying to take him out because you don't want him to squeal on you," Papoutsis says. "It's a permadeath-style, 5v5 game mode, and the informant also has information pertaining to special weapons caches on the map, so it encourages the law enforcement team to stay with him, so you can get to the pick-ups on the map and you can use them to your advantage to take out the other team and escort him to victory."

Those wanting a more compelling campaign

from the *Battlefield* franchise should have hope for what *Hardline* brings to the table. Players delve into the story of Nick Mendoza, a young detective who has been wronged and is looking for revenge outside of the law. The story takes players from Miami to Los Angeles with stops elsewhere, including the High Desert of California.

Taking cues from popular crime dramas on television, *Battlefield: Hardline* reveals its narrative using 10 TV show episodes rather than levels, but Visceral has also added larger changes to drive home the TV style.

"If you're playing a game and you've got to take a break, you get to see a 'Next Time On...' So just like your favorite TV show, you might see a little teaser for the next episode. We do the same thing. If you don't want the spoiler, you just hit 'skip' right away and you don't have to watch that," Papoutsis said. "When you return after maybe not playing it for a little bit, and you come back and you start up the game, you get treated to a 'Previously On...' and that kind of sets up what you're doing."

These presentation changes carry over into multiplayer, with loading screens emulating the style of a news ticker that explains the situation



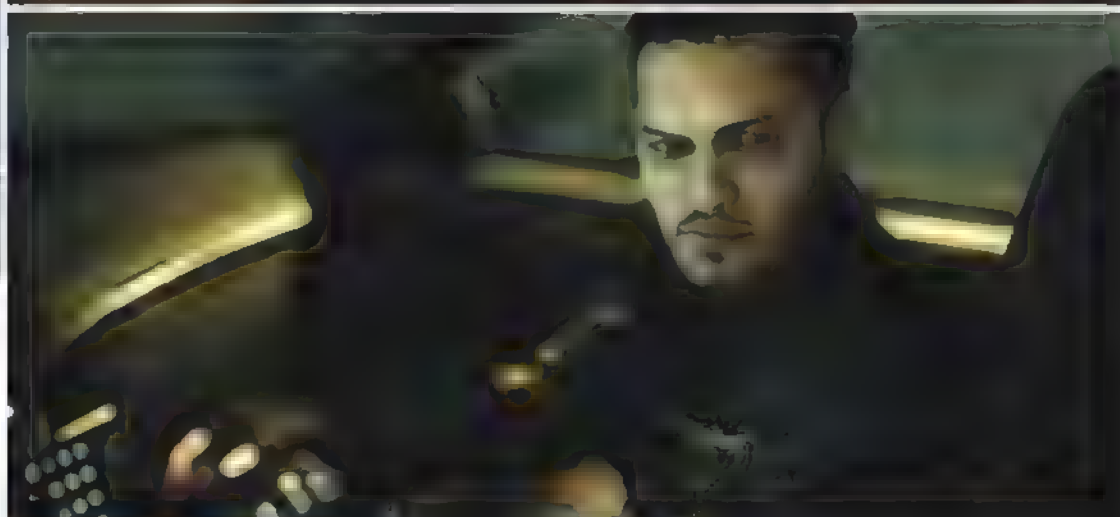
so both teams have context for the match about to take place.

Papoutsis is optimistic that the team can provide a stable online experience at launch by building off of the previous work done by the Battlefield 4 team. "If you look at Battlefield 4 today in the live environment, it's very, very good," he said. "We get the benefit of drafting off of all those improvements, but also, our team has worked very diligently to do stress tests, and we test the game every single day here."

Originally scheduled for release in October 2014, Battlefield: Hardline was pushed to March 2015 to help the team create a better experience using feedback collected during the game's beta test. "We got a ton of great feedback from the community, but we realized we [didn't] have a lot of time to implement all of it since we were planning on coming out at the end of October," Papoutsis explained. "But as we continued to build the game, both in multiplayer and single-player, we continued to have new ideas and things that we wanted to change or improve, and this extra time gave us the opportunity to do those things." » Brian Shea



New multiplayer modes with an emphasis on the cops and robbers angle add a new level of insanity



These modes for cops and robbers add a new level of insanity to being in new players to the series





Amplitude

A pitch-perfect reimagining

PlayStation 4 • PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Rhythm/Music

» **Platform**
Harmonix

» **Developer**
Harmonix

» **Release**
Summer

One of my favorite games of the PlayStation 2 era is the original *Amplitude*. The 2003 music game predated the guitar and band craze by several years, and laid the groundwork (along with its predecessor, *Frequency*) for the vertically scrolling gem note gameplay that would dominate the genre in the following years. After a naibiter of a Kickstarter in 2014, Harmonix has been quietly toiling away to craft a new version of *Amplitude* for modern consoles. After spending hands-on time with multiple songs, difficulties, and even multiplayer, I'm confident that the game is tapping into the same addictive qualities exhibited by the original.

Unlike instrument-based games like *Guitar Hero* or *Rock Band*, *Amplitude* has the player hopping back and forth between multiple parts of a song. Set up the drums at one time, and you may be leaving out the vocals until you have time to hop over and activate that track. Once played correctly for a few bars, the track in question goes onto autopilot for a time, remaining active even as you aim to bring other stems of the song to life. Activating a track involves beat-matching of the onscreen cues, and firing off patterns of left, middle, and right button presses (mapped to either the shoulder or face buttons) in time with that track's melody or rhythm. Adjusting to the new PS4 controller takes time, especially for those who use the shoulder-button input option; the recessed R2 isn't ideal for the quick taps required, but I mostly adjusted after several minutes of play.

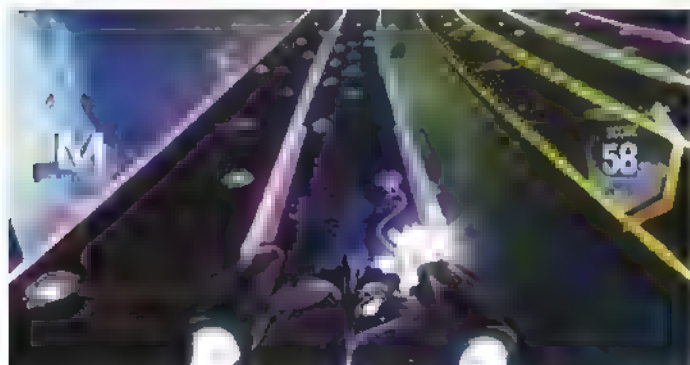
The challenge comes not only from rapid-fire beat-matching, but also switching quickly between tracks before your multiplier dies. Four difficulty modes provide a challenge for virtually any skill level; even after years of practice back in the day, the expert setting still gave me a run for my money. For returning players, the fundamental gameplay is spot-on, nailing the frenetic pace and rapt attention required by the original game.

Multiplayer is similarly nostalgic, allowing up to four players to tackle the song at once.

A fascinating competitive/cooperative vibe pervades these sessions, as players use pick-up powers to screw with one another even as the whole team works together to make the song's tracks come alive.

The visuals hold true to the surreal and colorful tone of the old games, but with appropriately modern visual effects and sharpness. Along with the lyrics of the five songs currently in the build, these visuals contribute to a concept album quality, which deals with the mental experiences of a synesthete who experiences sensations and music differently than other people. Harmonix's narrative unfolds through the course of the campaign using music crafted by the in-house team, but by playing the game players also unlock additional songs by other artists. Contributors include Super Meat Boy composer Danny Baranowsky, Minecraft's C418, Symbion Project's Kasson Crocker, Jim Guthrie of Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP fame, and even returning fan-favorite, Freezepop.

The music genre has seen some tremendous changes since the original release of *Amplitude*. My experience suggests that returning players should get almost exactly what they're expecting. If you're a more recent music game convert, it should only take a few songs to see what all the fuss is about. » **Matt Miller**



That Dragon, Cancer

Celebrating a life



Cancer is a beast. The Green family knows this all too well. They watched their son Joel battle the illness since he was one year old. During Joel's fight, the family decided to share their story by creating a video game called *That Dragon, Cancer*. Sadly, in the middle of the project, Joel passed away at the age of five. Since then, the game has changed profoundly, even expanding to PC after a successful Kickstarter campaign.

The adventure game lets players get to know Joel and experience different moments throughout his life via exploration and interaction. Initially, it showcased Joel's battle, but the game's vision has evolved. "When Joel died, we realized that the game we outlined was the story of cancer, not the story of Joel," says Joel's father and creator Ryan Green. "And so, our vision for the game shifted, as we focused on telling Joel's story in a way that would honor him."

The team went back to the drawing board, making sure each scene passed a simple test. "Does this cause the player to love Joel more?" And, "Does this allow the player to know Joel in some small way?" Green explains. "In the end, what remains is the story of our relationship with Joel, more than the specifics of his treatment."

That Dragon, Cancer is about moments, and the player being present in them. You play through the Green's memories of Joel; audio from home videos and voice-over dialogue from the Greens were included to make these experiences more authentic. "The result is a simple space that we hope feels lived in and emotionally intimate," Green says. "We want players to feel as comfortable as to sit with us and experience our lives with us, as one of our good friends would feel."

The journey includes hospital visits and the Greens' struggles, but most experiences are about just getting to know Joel. You watch him play with a dog, swing on a swing next to you, and hear his infectious laugh. "You start as a duck," says co-creator Josh Larson. "Just let that sink in for a second. Of all the ways we could start with the story of Joel fighting cancer, we start it with you as a duck. Why? Joel loved ducks. In fact, most of your time playing will be spent loving Joel and experiencing what Joel loved."

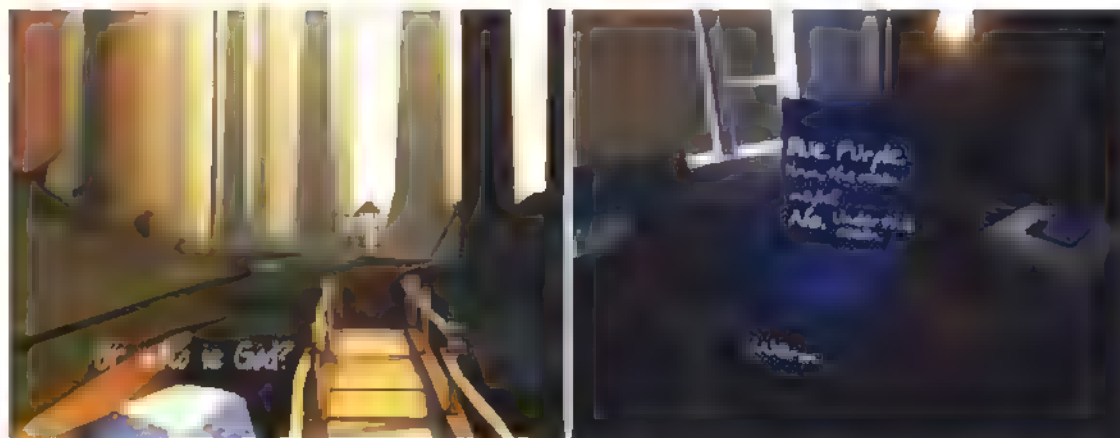
"My hope is that the player takes their time so that the spaces we've created aren't only filled with our memories, but that the familiar spaces can be filled with their own," Green adds. "Perhaps it's an extra moment riding a merry-go-round and looking up at the trees, or swinging with Joel on the playground, or rocking Joel to sleep and listening to him breathe, or playing a game one more time, just for Joel's enjoyment

of it. Those moments should be familiar to anyone, and so they have the ability to stir the player to reflect on their own experiences."

Asking players to face such an emotional and difficult obstacle such as cancer in a video game isn't an easy request. Green even admits to seeing plenty of people on social media say they're afraid to play the game. "My hope is that players who take the risk of living in our story through this game will agree that it gives more than it takes; that the experience gave them renewed hope, or a new understanding of faith, or a memory of great love to their life," Green says. "I hope that players understand that this game demands their emotional investment, but when they finish playing they can say that it gave more than it cost."

"Playing *That Dragon, Cancer* might be sad, but we hope it's also funny, sweet, repeatable, thought provoking, surprising, and even fun," Larson adds. — **Kimberley Wallace**

PC • Mac • Ouya
Style
 1-Player Adventure
 Numinous Games
Developer
 Numinous Games
 Fall



Landmark

Freeform fantasy

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
Massively Multiplayer
Online Role-Playing

» **Developer**
Sony Online
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Sony Online
Entertainment

» **TBA**

While EverQuest Next is still far on the horizon, many of the systems that will end up creating the world of Sony Online Entertainment's next big MMORPG can be found in Landmark. When we first got a taste of Landmark it was a very Minecraft-centric experience – players would stake a claim on some land and go out and harvest various resources to craft things and build amazing creations. Today, Landmark is well on its way toward becoming a full-fledged MMORPG of its own, with caves to explore, treasures to find, and monsters to fight. Without NPCs, questing, or developer-provided tales, the freeform environment is becoming a robust user playground that goes far beyond architectural-oriented beginnings.

Players can now craft, find, and equip weapons that dictate abilities and playstyles. While there isn't a class system behind the combat like there will be in EverQuest Next,

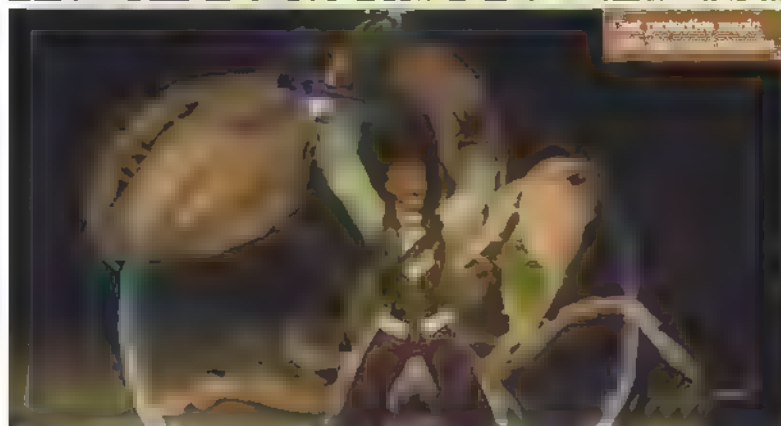
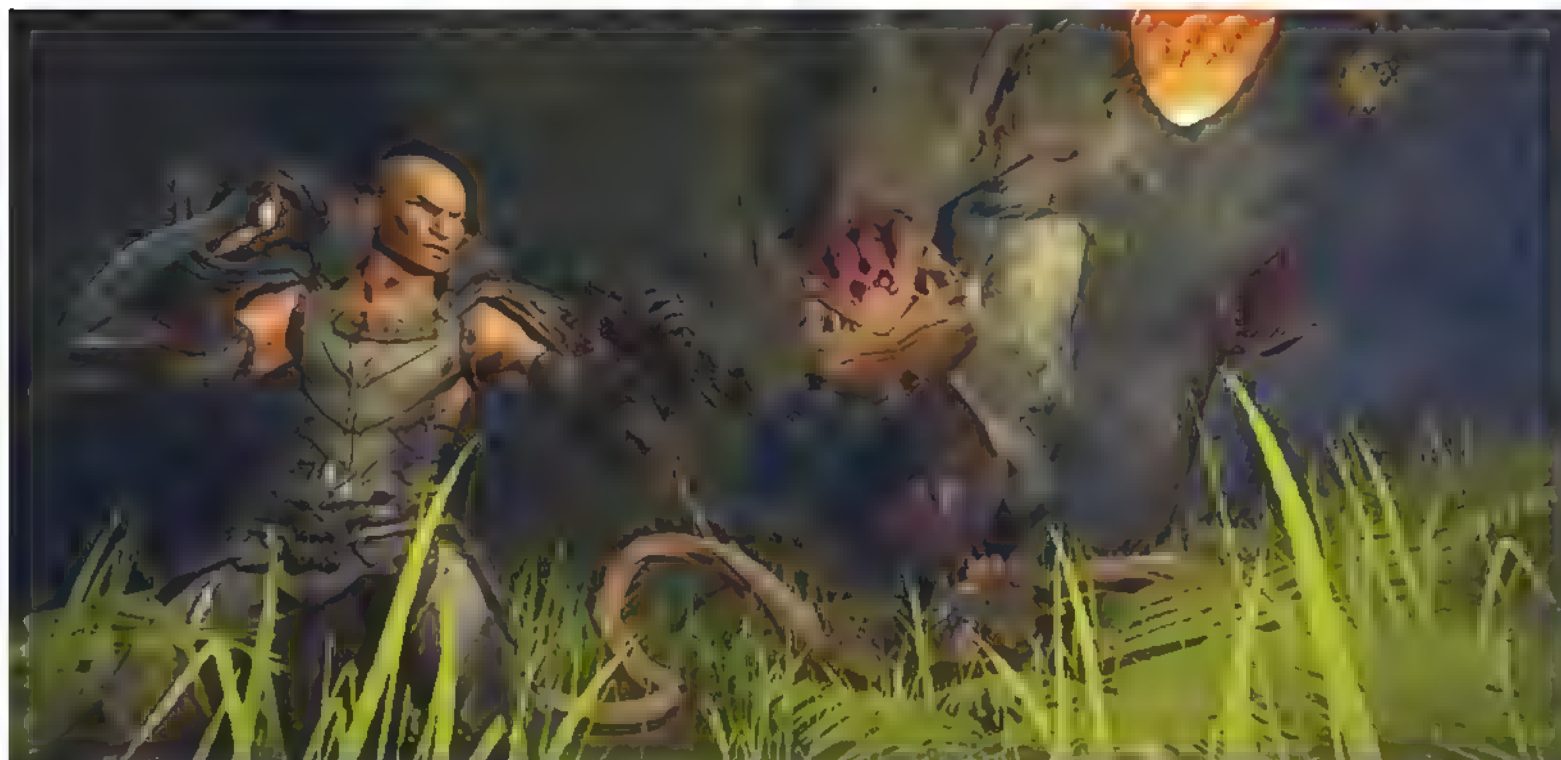
players can choose from a selection of classic RPG archetypes: the slow, heavy two-handed sword, poisonous daggers, buffing/healing wands, and tanky sword and board. Alongside the weaponry is armor of all kinds and keywords.

You need these new weapons to take on the monsters that have begun to trickle into Landmark. While only a few of them are currently in the game, each has a different skill set designed to challenge players as they search for relics and treasure throughout the world. Looking to do a little exploring? Prime up a pulverizer and dig deep under the surface layers, blowing up rock and dirt to shoot your way right into a cave system full of valuable loot. Large caverns and buried ruins await the most curious of explorers, full of goodies – and monsters – waiting for adventurers to come calling. While players were essentially invulnerable when Landmark began, death and falling damage are part of the game now,

so you have to be aware of your surroundings. Monster loot can be broken down for raw materials, facilitating a playstyle that eschews traditional mining and harvesting, and they can also drop valuable crafting recipes. There's nothing like coming home to your decked-out claim after battling some monsters, and enjoying some respite at your fully decorated encampment.

If hunting monsters or hauling ore to make fantastic buildings isn't your thing, players can also opt to battle each other in PvP in a variety of arenas and battle zones.

Landmark is a staging ground for many of the components that will make their way into EverQuest Next, but it's also a game all its own. If you're looking for a freeform MMORPG without any of the story or NPC narrative, this is a fantastic option to check out as it continues to add heaps of content this year. – **Daniel Tack**



Kingdom Come: Deliverance

An RPG gets real



» PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC • Mac
» 1-Player Role-Playing
» Warhorse Studios
» **Developer**
Warhorse Studios
» TBA

Kingdom Come: Deliverance has a much different premise than many role-playing games. Forget the fantasy – your quest is based in a world without dragons, elements, or magic. The first-person title places the player in the role of a young blacksmith in Medieval Europe, and you have the chance to engage in traditional roles like the combat-intensive knight, stealthy rogue, and bard with a silver tongue. Whatever path you choose to take through the tale, don't expect to see any

eives or magic rings to assist you along the way. Everything is rooted as close to reality as possible for an RPG, with a focus on historical accuracy.

As in many RPGs, you have the option to explore, craft, level up skills, and interact with the many NPCs around you. You can follow one of several paths through the tale, and choose to engage with the world in multiple ways, from traditional "good guy" to more deceptive, duplicitous, or shady options.

Dialogue trees form some of the backdrop of character development, and despite three clearly defined "classes," players are free to mix their points around each as their abilities develop based on their actions.

Kingdom Come: Deliverance aspires toward an open-world with many choices and combat inspired by actual 15th-century techniques. The concept is novel, but we won't know if it delivers on its potential until the game comes to PC and other platforms down the line. • **Daniel Tack**

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State Of Decay: Year One Survival Edition

Microsoft's zombie sleeper hit rises again

» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Developer**
Undead Labs

April 2

Many games are left to rot in the wild after they're finished, but that's not what happened to *State of Decay*. Since June 2013, Undead Labs has released expansions and updates that addressed many of the issues players had at launch. Soon, the game's gritty take on survival in a zombie-filled apocalypse will be hitting the Xbox One and, for the first time, retail. We spoke with lead designer Geoffrey Card to learn what's new, for both fresh players and veteran survivors.

"It sort of represents the first year of the game's progress," Card says of the game's name. "It also gives you that sense of the way people mark time. After the apocalypse hits, there's no point in saying 2015 now. You might as well just say, 'Year one of the new world.' So it sort of gives it that apocalyptic vibe."

The Year One Survival Edition includes everything from the initial release, as well as all of the content from the open-ended Breakdown DLC and the Lifeline campaign. Undead Labs is giving the game's presentation some much-needed special attention, too. The original release was a lot of fun, but at times it was as visually attractive as a worm-eaten corpse. Card says it now runs at 1080p, with better texture quality, as well as improved and newly added character animations.

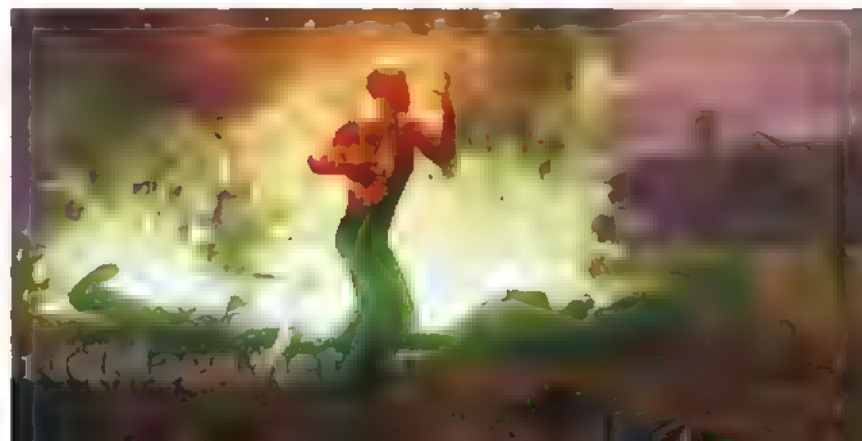
All survivors have a blade as a weapon of last resort, in case you run out of ammo or your golf club breaks. "If you're in the apocalypse, common sense is you'll have a knife at all times," Card says. Players looking for something more explosive can use the new incendiary ammo in shotguns, which lets them set clusters of zombies ablaze.

A new mission chain is spread throughout both campaigns, centered on a mysterious radio broadcast. Card won't give up many specifics, but he says that players who complete it are rewarded with new vehicles and equipment for sticking with it. If you don't have that kind of patience, you can still track down new SUV auto types in the world or some new super-exotic vehicles that the team has stashed away in the world.

State of Decay has sold more than two million copies since its release, which is a number that's not lost on the team. "So much of what's gone well for our studio recently has been people supporting our game, people playing our game on Twitch, people talking about it, and sharing it through word of mouth," Card says. "We feel like we owe a lot to the people who actually stick with the game and make it a part of their lives, so we're trying to find all the ways we can to reward them."

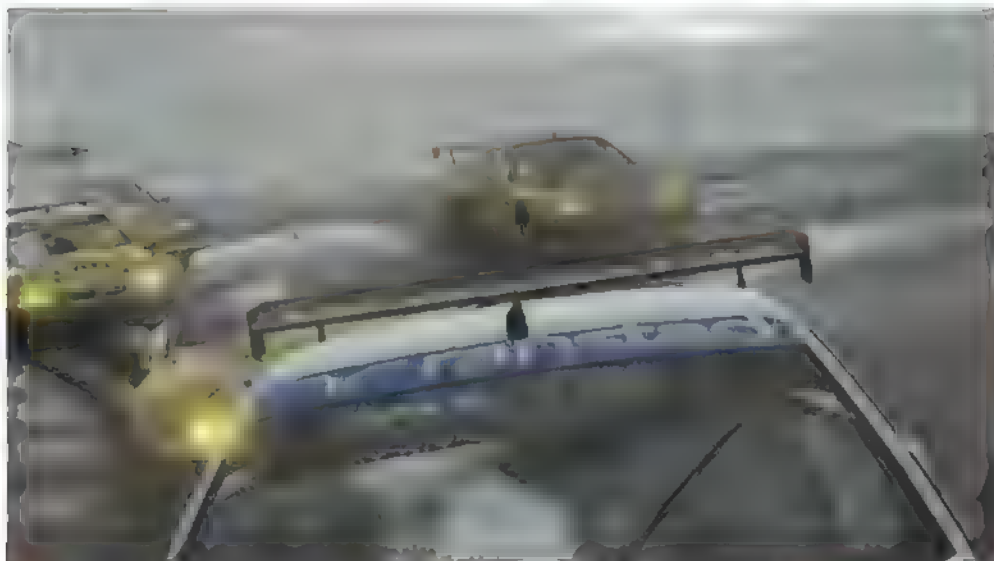
For instance, returning players won't have to start fresh if they don't want to. An update to the Xbox 360 and Steam versions will let players export their saves into the enhanced edition of the game. As thanks, those players will gain access to an exclusive new hero, Gurubani Kaur. She's a college student whose parents immigrated to the United States from India. Her parents kept a number of relics to remind them of their homeland. When she comes to visit and finds her parents gone, she grabs a pair of swords and a suppressed World War 2-era rifle. "Now she's basically sort of a badass Sikh warrior," Card says.

Undead Labs will continue to reward players who stick with the game, too. They'll be supporting Xbox Challenges, giving players special in-game rewards for completing these time-sensitive tasks. As Card sees it, *The Year One Survival Edition* isn't going to be a case of firing and forgetting it. "It's part of an ongoing interaction," he says. » **Jeff Cork**



Project Cars

A new sim racer that's already ahead of the pack



Project Cars from developer Slightly Mad Studios (Need for Speed: Shift series) is not like other sim racers or anything else with four wheels. An interesting profit sharing structure has allowed fans to play the game consistently during development and enjoy special access to the developers, and Slightly Mad's attachment to its community has created a title with an attention to detail that separates it from the pack.

The game is similar to other sim racers with its faithfully rendered high-powered cars hugging demanding real-life courses, testing and stretching the laws of physics at every turn. But there are a number of aspects that should be more commonplace in other racing games.

Weather and time progression sliders play up the already impressive graphics. Choosing weather presets for solo and online games changes the sequence of weather patterns and how fast they occur mid-race (you can also set it to

random). Going from dry conditions to a thunderstorm and back again can necessitate changing tires in the pits as well as turning on your windshield wipers and headlights. You can even save your tire pressure preferences and more for future pit stops.

The game also lets you customize the layout of your HUD, allowing you to move the position of elements such as the minimap and speedometer, and for online races you can choose to have multiple practice sessions, qualifying, rolling starts, A.I.-controlled field fillers, and more.

These gameplay details are embedded in a career structure featuring eight different racing series you can jump between and an online portion containing players' time trial ghosts and various community race events. Project Cars' attention to detail isn't at the expense of offering a breadth of racing experiences — making it a racer that seemingly has its bases covered. » Matthew Kato

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC • Wii U

» **Gameplay**
1-Player Racing
(16-Player Online)

» **Developer**
Slightly Mad Studios

» **Developer**
Bandai Namco Games
March 17



Developer Slightly Mad Studios says that over 80,000 people have been involved in the game's creation, and some community members have created their own second-screen apps.

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gameinformer

GAME OF THE MONTH

95 The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask 3D

The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask released nearly 16 years ago for the Nintendo 64, radically changing the successful 3D Zelda formula that had been established only a few years earlier. Nintendo has modified the game for its 3DS debut, but not at the expense of changing the experience or the emotion of Link's stay in Termina. Majora's Mask on 3DS is the best the game has ever been.

NOTE: We rarely give our Game of the Month award to remastered and rereleased games, but we made an exception this month for Majora's Mask on 3DS. The tweaks and improvements make it the ideal way for newcomers and longtime fans to play this classic piece of Zelda history.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of getting nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Accidentally drinking kool-aid.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 8.75 and 10.
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 8 and 8.5.
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 6.5 and 8.75.
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue.

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Let's
Go
Places

WorldMag.net

Saints Row: Gat Out Of Hell

The devil you know

7.5

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) Publisher Deep Silver Developer Volition, High Voltage Software Release January 20 Rating M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

A short standalone adventure that pits Johnny Gat and Kinzie Kensington against Satan in the pits of Hell.

» Graphics

Hell is caked in vibrant fire and brimstone, making it an impressive spectacle. The graphical fidelity is uniform with last generation's Saints Row IV, including framerate loss when soaring at great speeds across the environment.

Johnny Gat has plenty of great dialogue including a bit about Occam's Razor. The show stealer, however, is an excellently penned Disney-inspired musical number.

» Playability

Largely a reskinned version of Saints Row IV with the welcome addition of angelic flight.

» Entertainment

Short, funny, but lacking in gameplay complexity.

» Replay Value

Moderate

Outside of retconning Saints Row's lore, or sending the 3rd Street Saints on a time-traveling adventure, Gat Out of Hell would appear to be the final outing for the purple fleur-de-lis. Over the course of four games, the Saints paved a trail of glory unlike anything we've seen. Their ambitions started small: liberate Stilwater's streets from the violence inflicted by rival gangs. That endeavor led to great fame and power: fast cars, skyscrapers, armies, and even control of the White House. With the Saints' leader standing tall as the President of the United States of America, this small gang became humanity's last hope against alien invaders. The Saints won out in the end, but not before Earth was destroyed. Humanity was decimated. The last hope for our species to survive lies drifting aimlessly in space with the Saints.

And that ridiculous timeline of events leads us to one place the Saints haven't been: the afterlife. Holding true to this series' bombastic approach to storytelling, their mission is to assassinate Satan and bring hope to all of the souls he's damned.

Developers Volition and High Voltage Software interpret Hell as a thriving metropolis (called New Hades), lit mostly by the fire in the air and the molten rivers running underneath it. The city consists of ominous black skyscrapers, a rundown industrial district, soot-infested with angry tentacles, and roads filled with rusted cars and monster trucks spewing fire.

Unlike previous Saints Row games, a player-created character is not the star of this outworldly adventure. Johnny Gat and Kinzie Kensington, two of Saints Row's most popular characters, sprout angelic wings and are our guides through this dangerous place.

Through this ridiculous premise, Volition and High Voltage find a fun way to raise the stakes for the 3rd Street Saints. The series continues to spiral further out of control with each new entry, and this installment pushes that boundary even further, peaking with a hilarious musical number that sees Johnny Gat, Satan, and the devil's daughter expressing their feelings in



a song that seems like it was stripped right out of a Disney movie.

The gameplay is infused with light hellish themes, but lacks creativity, making this Saints Row experience the least inspired yet. The majority of the gameplay concepts are re-skinned from Saints Row IV, and most of the experience lacks complexity and unfolds through rote shooting galleries.

Completing objectives for characters like William Shakespeare, who has holed himself up as a DJ in one of Hell's nightclubs, brings amusing dialogue, but without the follow-through of a legitimate mission it feels like part of the game is missing. The creative mission structures from previous Saints Row games are nowhere to be found here. Johnny Gat even makes fun of this point. The majority of the critical path content is tied to loyalty mission checklists, in which the player must just complete a wide variety of side content.

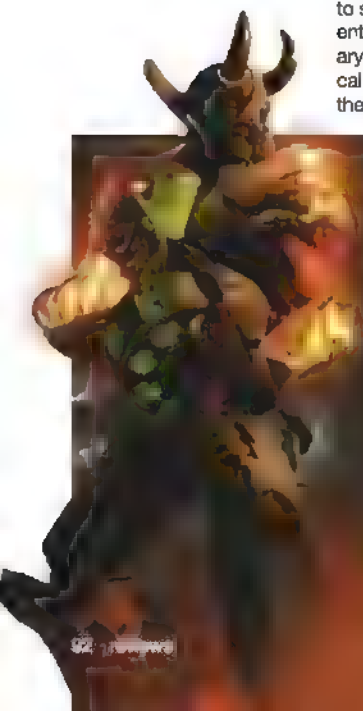
The diversions and activities, my favorite parts of the last few Saints Row games, fare well, but again are largely built around Saints Row IV's conventions. With the story campaign only consisting of a handful of missions—which can be completed in a couple of hours—most of your time goes into side activities, like

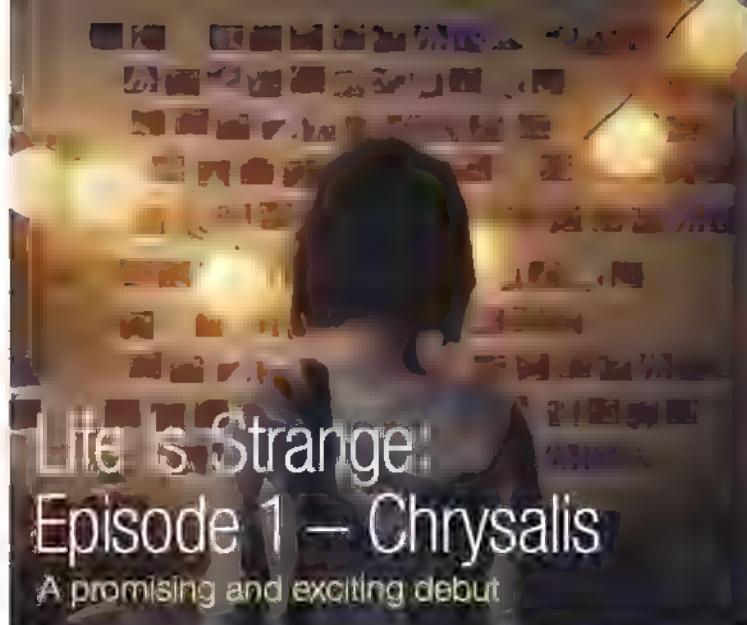
Mayhem, Survival, Fraud (now called Torment Fraud), Tank Mayhem, and ring-based races. You can also beat the crap out of frat boys in Pledge Rush, a scoring-based activity that pushes you to launch sweatered college kids hundreds of feet into goals. I enjoyed most of the side content—as familiar as it is—and found the time was well invested, as leveling up once again does a nice job of empowering you with godlike abilities, especially for flight.

This is going to sound a bit odd for a Saints Row game, but the best part of Gat Out of Hell is the overworld exploration. Soaring across the city with giant angel wings that stretch to both corners of the screen is surprisingly satisfying, much like the web swinging in a Spider-Man game. The flight controls are beautifully executed, giving players a great sense of speed, and a level of precision that allows for tiny corridors to be threaded. Flight isn't just used to reach mission markers. Much like Saints Row IV's version of Steelport, Hell is covered in hundreds of glowing orbs to hunt down. I would often get sidetracked in the collect-a-thon aspect, gliding every which way to grab more orbs, which sometimes separate into five shards that you must grab in sequence without touching the ground.

Johnny and Kinzie are equipped with a wide variety of superpowers that are stripped right out of Saints Row IV's VR sequences. The powerful stomp move, which sends out a lethal shockwave, is back in nearly identical form. The freeze blast also returns, but now turns enemies to stone. The one creative addition is the ability to summon gremlins that bite at the ankles of Satan's underlings. The selection of weapons is equally familiar, until you come across the recliner chair outfitted with heat-seeking rockets and dual miniguns. That weapon is one of the series' best, but it does limit movement for obvious reasons.

Gat Out of Hell comes up short in mission variety, but concludes in a tantalizing way: with five different endings. Could one of them point to the future of the series? Time will tell, but if this is indeed the last hurrah for this continuity of the 3rd Street Saints, it's been a hell of a ride. Volition. » **Andrew Reiner**





Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Square Enix
Developer Dontnod Entertainment
Release January 30 **Rating** M
SILVER

8.5

I'm glad *Life is Strange* exists. Developer Dontnod (which made 2013's *Remember Me*) isn't afraid to focus on narrative and challenge the player with choice, but even more impressive are the subjects usually taboo for video games. *Life is Strange* is genuine, grounding itself in real-life struggles, but throws in enough twists to make things exciting. Dontnod plays to its strengths to create an outstanding opener for this episodic adventure.

The story follows Maxine, an 18-year-old photography student who has recently moved back to her hometown. Maxine's life revolves around her passion for photography, but she's also dealing with self-doubt and fear of rejection. The focus on realistic issues is refreshing; I could relate to Maxine's insecurities about her day-to-day school life and attempts to mend a broken friendship. More serious topics (like abuse and assault) surface, and Dontnod isn't afraid to tackle them.

Life is Strange isn't completely grounded in reality. When Maxine witnesses a murder, she discovers her ability to reverse time and change the outcome. Reversing time is an interesting mechanic, since you still have uncertainty as to what the long-term effects of your decisions are, but you gain more insight by seeing their immediate outcomes. What I enjoy most about these decisions is their ambiguity; a "right" decision is never available. Do I turn in a shady character to the principal, or will that just cause me more problems down the road? Even taking the rap for a friend so she doesn't get in trouble for dabbling in drugs can have vicious consequences.

Outside of rewinding time, the majority of the gameplay consists of exploration, with no combat at all. Tons of items are peppered about waiting to be found, and they add small tidbits to the story and characters' personalities. I love that the writing taps into raw emotion, but the characters are walking clichés, like the rich mean girl and the religious virgin outcast. Every character falls into this trap, making it hard to take them seriously.

The next episode will surely define what Dontnod is out to accomplish, but *Life is Strange*'s introduction is a good look at the characters and dilemmas. I have some concerns about the originality of the subject matter, but the focus on realistic problems is compelling, and the care put into Maxine's world holds plenty of promise. — **Kimberley Wallace**

PS4 • Xbox One
 PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Navigate the world as an 18-year-old girl with the ability to reverse time.

» Graphics

The visuals aren't mind-blowing, but *Life is Strange* has its own unique, detailed style with hand-painted textures.

» Sound

Music expertly creates the mood of certain scenes and the voice actors fit their roles well.

» Playability

The controls are easy to grasp, but sometimes selecting objects close together takes more effort than it should.

» Replay Value

This first episode shows a lot of potential. The characters and their struggles are relatable, and the narrative sets up plenty of intriguing threads.

» Replay Value

Moderately high.

#IDARB

It's dangerous to go alone



Style 1 to 8-Player Action (8-Player Online)
Publisher Other Ocean Interactive **Developer** Other Ocean Interactive
Release February 4 **Rating** E

8.25

Xbox One

» Concept

Cross basketball, hockey, and a classic 8-bit platformer to create a frantic multiplayer experience.

» Graphics

Visuals are plain in favor of solid mechanics and customization.

» Sound

Music takes a backseat to the action, but what does surface is enjoyable. The music creator is impressive in its versatility.

» Playability

Tight controls make platforming and firing off shots a joy.

» Replay Value

Vying for points next to a collection of friends scratches many of the same multiplayer itches as *Super Smash Bros.* Hashtag bombs even let spectators join in the action in an entertaining and unique way.

» Replay Value

High.

Other Ocean's *#IDARB*, or *It Draws a Red Box*, began as a tweet from developer Mike Mika asking for input from his followers on a project for which he didn't have any particular plans or ultimate goals. After continued input from the community, the result became *#IDARB*, an eSports game with an absurd sense of humor and a frantic, contagious energy.

The rules of the game are simple: Get the ball in the goal. How many points you get for scoring a goal depends on where you take your shots, where the ball goes before it gets to the goal, and how you take advantage of the players on your team (and the opponents getting in your way).

Rounds get chaotic quickly, and adding more players only makes things crazier. Even without hitting the 4v4 maximum, matches look like a children's soccer game; a horde of players follows the ball around trying to gain control of it, if only for a moment. A pass button allows room for teamwork and tactics, but jamming the steal button and flinging the ball towards your goal with reckless abandon can be just as much fun.

Creating your own players, teams, and soundtracks is a big draw for *#IDARB*, and though I don't consider myself talented when it comes to in-game creation, I had fun toying with *#IDARB*'s tools. I made an avatar that looked like myself, and it's easy to share your creations with QR codes.

With only a single mode, a few minigames peppered in, and one arena, the experience lacks overall variety. A single-player mode against A.I. opponents is available, but playing it doesn't unlock new features or even offer many achievements. If you're not interested in playing with others, I can't recommend *#IDARB*. Even going online by yourself into matchmaking forces you into 1v1 games unless you have others sitting next to you playing — a disappointing limitation.

#IDARB is a fantastic party game with its large player count, simple-yet-solid mechanics, and the ability to let those spectating interact. It's the perfect game to keep loaded on your Xbox One, as long as you have someone nearby to join the fun. — **Kyle Hilliard**



This review pertains to the PC version. It is also available on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360.



8.75

SILVER

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Defiant Development
Developer Defiant Development **Release** February 17 **Rating** NR

PS4 • Xbox One
PC • Vita

» **Concept**

Create an action/RPG rogue-like experience through cards

» **Graphics**

Card illustrations and the game board bring things to life, with decent graphics in battle

» **Sound**

The dealer's constant cajoling forms a notable, dramatic backdrop to the game

» **Playability**

Jumping in is easy, but some players may become frustrated with elements that can turn a great run into disaster

» **Replayability**

Discovering the secrets behind the cards and creating different dungeon mixes results in a well-designed, original experience

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

In *Hand of Fate*, you use a constantly growing deck of cards to form the very dungeons that you move through. You challenge increasingly difficult bosses, and seek to defeat the omniscient dealer. Although *Hand of Fate* hinges on cards, it's not a card game; it's a roguelike action/RPG, and a surprisingly fun and original experience that comes together admirably.

The dungeons are randomly assembled, so you never know what boons or burdens are under each card tile, but you can stack the deck with a few cards prior to each adventure. The rest of the deck is determined by the dealer, and you have to change your playstyle to accommodate. Some levels may curse you each time you opt to use a shop, so you may want to prepare your deck accordingly.

You assemble equipment and encounter decks, which can be edited before each adventure. Weapons and armor you discover are drawn from the equipment deck. When you step over a card tile, the card comes

from your encounter deck. These cards can be standard enemy encounters, which offer fast-paced action combat with blocking, swinging, special abilities, and a lot of dodging. The battles are fun, but take a backseat to the non-combat encounters that constantly leave you wondering if you made the right choice to gamble with drunks at a tavern or attempt to get a blacksmith to craft you the perfect weapon.

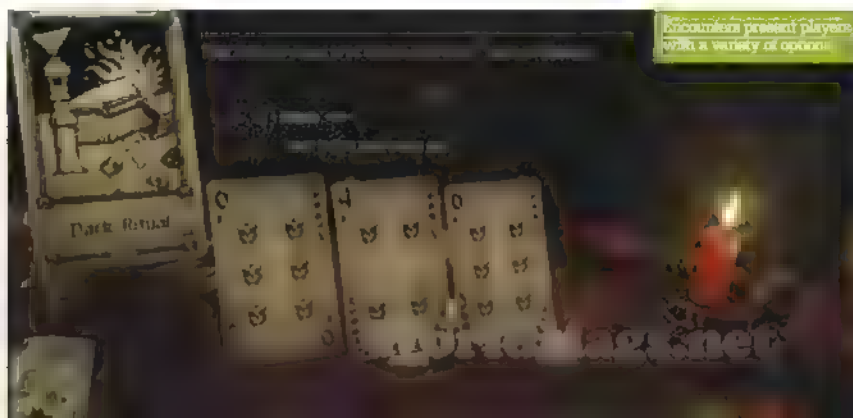
Encounter cards aren't a ways fights; they contain myriad other options that don't take place on the battlefield at all. A player could wander through a secret portal to end up on another map entirely, meet a bard, explore a chasm, or strike a deal with a demon. These encounters often have tokens associated with them, and if the card is completed in a specific fashion, that token yields permanent cards to add to your core decks. A good portion of the game is management of these other encounters instead of a focus on fighting,

as acquisition or loss of core resources can come from these events.

Tokens are persistent, and you keep them even if you fail a map, which hedges any frustration that comes from dying during a level. You are constantly progressing, making things potentially easier on your next attempt. For instance, if you make a blood bargain with some vampires, it may cost you a nearly lethal amount of health and make you easy pickings in the next battle, but the token you acquire offers you some magical gear for the next attempt. This feels like an excellent compromise, making *Hand of Fate* sort of a "roguelite" as opposed to a strict, unforgiving roguelike.

You manage three key resources along the way: gold, food, and health. If you run out of food, each tile movement costs you health instead of recovering it, so management of all three resources is crucial as you wander the dungeons. Combined with the other systems in play, these elements make *Hand of Fate* feel like an awesome tabletop experience with the dealer as a sort of dungeon master—you never know exactly what's going to happen next, and it keeps things continually exciting.

I noticed a difficulty spike toward the end, but overall the card-based journey is a fun, challenging jaunt that should leave you craving more as you run into disasters and tough battles, taking your tokens and licking your wounds as each attempt brings you just a little closer to the next boss. While the game could use some enemy variety, overall the good mix of encounters and potential outcomes shine and keep things interesting the whole way through. » **Daniel Tack**



The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask 3D

A life worth reliving



Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Nintendo Developer Grezzo, Nintendo Release February 13 Rating E10+

9.25

Many people regard *Ocarina of Time* as one of the best games ever made, which makes the existence of *Majora's Mask* somewhat surprising. Nintendo's willingness to drastically alter a successful formula (and take it in such a dark direction) so quickly after *Ocarina's* release is even more unfathomable now that we've had 15 years to reflect. *Majora's Mask* plays like a *Zelda* game, but its restrictive timeframe and recycled character assets were divisive among fans. Despite its departure from tradition, the appeal of this entry is powerful, and *Majora's Mask 3D* is the perfect excuse to revisit the strangest core *Zelda* game ever released.

Though it has been tweaked in a number of positive ways, *Majora's Mask 3D* plays and feels familiar. I remember *Termina* as a dreary, sad world, but I went into this remake expecting that time (and my young age when I first played the game) had warped my memories. In fact, it's every bit as gothic as I remember; *Majora's Mask* is a surprisingly dark game with undercurrents of sharp sadness overshadowed by the giant moon hovering in the sky. The three-day rotation gives you a chance to look closely at the lives of those living in *Termina*, and I was surprised by how interesting and strange its characters are—even after all these years. The tone, world, and story all hold up well.

Beyond the story, *Majora's Mask's* dungeons and combat are also relatively unchanged for this new version. Though *Termina* has fewer dungeons than comparable *Zelda* titles, it has no dearth of secrets. With fewer dungeons, puzzles are dispersed throughout the world, creating a denser and more consistent environment.

Majora's Mask 3D has a number of changes from the original 2000 Nintendo 64 release—more than the 2011 remake of *Ocarina of Time*.

Some changes are small, while others drastically affect the pacing, but every change is worthwhile and well implemented. The biggest and best change is the way Link speeds up time. On Nintendo 64, if you wanted to participate in a specific event, you could speed up time to make it arrive faster, but even then, you couldn't escape the need to wait. Link still can't go backwards in time (other than the hard reset, which places him back to the beginning of the three-day period), but now he can jump forward to whenever he wants. This handily eliminates my major complaint about an otherwise amazing game: You were forced to sit around and kill time, even though a timer counting down to destruction loomed at the bottom of the screen.

Though the most serious issue has been addressed, *Majora's Mask* still has frustrations. The *Groundhog Day* nature of the game means you are repeating yourself a lot—in some cases doing the same small things every time you reset. The unavoidable passage of time unnecessarily interrupts your short-term goals; while chasing a ghost through the snow,

I moved into the dawn of the second day and the ghost disappeared, forcing me to restart the chase from the beginning.

The timer can also create some awesome moments of intensity. While working on the Zora domain dungeon, I drifted into the night of the third day during the boss fight. As the screen shook and disaster loomed outside, I frantically swam alongside a giant mechanical masked fish trying to take him out as quickly as I could. The timer creates a level of intensity rarely seen in *Zelda* games, and despite some minor qualms, I found myself loving it all over again.

Purists will decry the changes made to *Majora's Mask* no matter how slight they may be, but I am seated firmly in the "change is good" camp. It's everything you remember, but without the boredom or frustration related to the passage of time. *Majora's Mask* was a game ahead of its time in 2000, and revisiting it under this new lens only confirms that sentiment. Whether you're returning to *Termina* or visiting it for the first time, *Majora's Mask 3D* is the ideal way to experience this classic.

— Kyle Hilliard

3DS

» Concept

Remake *Zelda's* creepiest chapter with new visuals and some carefully implemented new mechanics.

» Graphics

Far from the greatest technical showcase the 3DS has to offer, but it does a fantastic job presenting *Majora's Mask* as you remember it (as opposed to how it actually looked on the N64).

» Sound

The soundtrack has not been adjusted or changed for the re-release, and it is still one of the highlights.

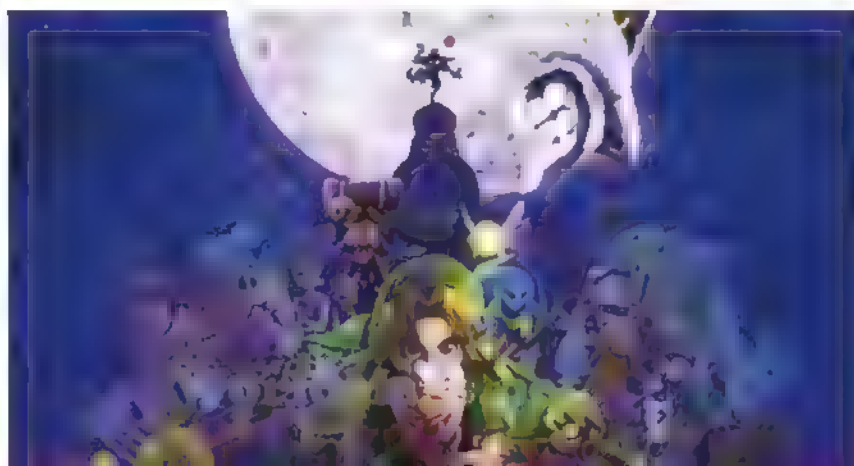
» Playability

Link feels and moves better than he did on the N64 controller, making previously difficult sequences (like the Goron race) much more fun.

» Technical Excellence

Even without being remade, *Majora's Mask* stands as one of the most interesting and through-provoking entries. The experience has only been made better for the 3DS.

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



PLAYSTATION 4

Alien: Isolation	7.75	Nov-14
Assassin's Creed Unity	8	Jan-15
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	9	Dec-14
Crow, The	7	Feb-15
Destiny	8.75	Nov-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
Dragon Age: Inquisition	9.5	Dec-14
DriveClub	7.75	Dec-14
Evil Within: The	9	Dec-14
Far Cry 4	8.75	Jan-15
FIFA 15	9.25	Nov-14
Game of Thrones: Episode 1 - Iron from Ice	8.5	Feb-15
Geometry Wars 3: Dimensions	8	Feb-15
Golf Club: The	8	Oct-14
Grand Theft Auto V	9.75	Jan-15
Jara Croft and the Temple of Osiris	7.75	Jan-15
Legend of Korra: The	5.5	Jan-15
Jago Batman 3: Beyond Gotham	7.5	Jan-15
LittleBigPlanet 3	8.5	Jan-15
Lords of the Fallen	8.5	Jan-15
Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor	8.25	Nov-14
Natural Doctrine	6.5	Dec-14
NBA 2K16	7.75	Dec-14
NBA Live 15	5.75	Jan-15
Never Alone	6.5	Feb-15
NHL 15	5.5	Nov-14

Pier Solar HD	7	Dec-14
Pro Evolution Soccer 2015	8.5	Jan-15
Resident Evil HD	9.5	Feb-15
Secret Ponchos	5	Feb-15
Sherlock Holmes: Crimes & Punishment	8	Dec-14
Skylanders: Trap Team	8.75	Dec-14
Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 1 - Zero Sum	6.5	Feb-15
WWE 2K15	7	Jan-15

XBOX ONE

Alien: Isolation	7.75	Nov-14
Assassin's Creed Unity	8	Jan-15
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	9	Dec-14
Crow, The	7	Feb-15
D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die	7.5	Nov-14
Dance Central: Spotlight	8	Nov-14
Destiny	8.75	Nov-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
Dragon Age: Inquisition	9.5	Dec-14
Evil Within: The	9	Dec-14
Fantasia: Music Evolved	8.25	Dec-14
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FIFA 15	9.25	Nov-14
Forza Horizon 2	8.25	Nov-14
Game of Thrones: Episode 1 - Iron from Ice	8.5	Feb-15
Geometry Wars 3: Dimensions	8	Feb-15
Grand Theft Auto V	9.75	Jan-15

Half: The Master Chief Collection	9.25	Jan-15
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NHL 15	5.5	Nov-14
Pro Evolution Soccer 2015	8.5	Jan-15
Project Spark	7.5	Dec-14
Resident Evil HD	9.5	Feb-15
Sherlock Holmes: Crimes & Punishment	8	Dec-14
Skylanders: Trap Team	8.75	Dec-14
Sunset Overdrive	9.25	Dec-14
Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 1 - Zero Sum	6.5	Feb-15
WWE 2K15	7	Jan-15

PLAYSTATION 3

Assassin's Creed Rogue	8.25	Dec-14
Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel	7.5	Dec-14
Destiny	8.75	Nov-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
Dragon Age: Inquisition	9.5	Dec-14
Escape Dead Island	2	Jan-15
Evil Within: The	9	Dec-14

Far Cry 4	8.75	Jan-15
Game of Thrones: Episode 1 - Iron from Ice	8.5	Feb-15
Kingdom Hearts HD 2.6 Remix	9	Jan-15
Legend of Korra: The	5.5	Jan-15
Jago Batman 3: Beyond Gotham	7.5	Jan-15
NHL 15	7	Nov-14
Persona 4 Arena Ultimax	8.5	Dec-14
Pier Solar HD	7	Dec-14
Resident Evil HD	9.5	Feb-15
Skylanders: Trap Team	8.75	Dec-14
Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 1 - Zero Sum	6.5	Feb-15
WWE 2K15	7	Jan-15

XBOX 360

Assassin's Creed Rogue	8.25	Dec-14
Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel	7.5	Dec-14
Crow, The	7	Feb-15
Destiny	8.75	Nov-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
Dragon Age: Inquisition	9.5	Dec-14
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Skylanders: Trap Team	8.75	Dec-14
Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 1 - Zero Sum	6.5	Feb-15
WWE 2K15	7	Jan-15

WII U

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Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker	8.25	Jan-15
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Hyrule Warriors	8	Nov-14
Jago Batman 3: Beyond Gotham	7.5	Jan-15
Skylanders: Trap Team	8.75	Dec-14
Sonic Boom: Rise of Lyric	4	Jan-15
Super Smash Bros.	9.75	Jan-15

PC

A City Sleeps	8	Dec-14
Assassin's Creed Unity	8	Jan-15
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	9	Dec-14
Civilization: Beyond Earth	9	Dec-14
Costume Quest 2	6.75	Dec-14
Crow, The	7	Feb-15
Dragon Age: Inquisition	9.5	Dec-14
Elite: Dangerous	7.5	Feb-15
Escape Dead Island	2	Jan-15
Evil Within: The	9	Dec-14

7.75 | Xeodrifter

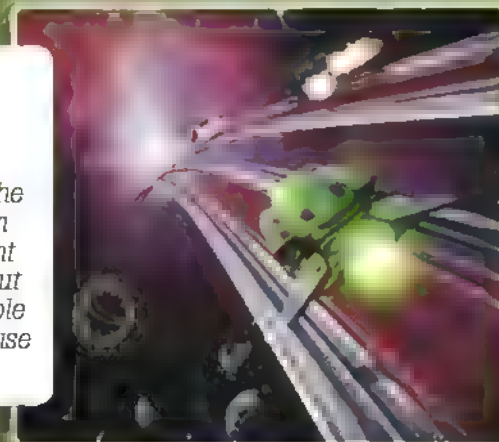
Platform 3DS, PC
Release December 11 Rating E

A conceptual tie to Nintendo's Metroid series isn't a free pass, but the time-tested formula is a great place to start. In the case of Xeodrifter, it serves as a solid framework to deliver a compact and entertaining retro adventure, though one that doesn't venture too far off the map. — Joe Juba

5 | Switch Galaxy Ultra

Platform PS4, Vita Release December 23 Rating E10+

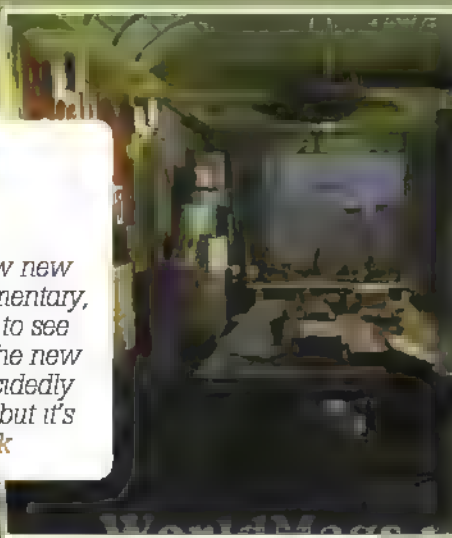
In a speed-focused, reflex-driven game, the controls need to work well. They don't in Switch Galaxy Ultra, which is a consistent and damning problem. Anything fun about the experience rapidly decays as the simple act of moving your ship becomes an exercise in frustration. — Joe Juba



7 | Gnm Fandango Remastered

Platform PS4, PC, Vita Release January 27 Rating E10+

If you're already a fan of the game, the few new additions are nice — but aside from the commentary, they're far from indispensable. I'm curious to see what players who have cut their teeth on the new breed of adventure games think of this decidedly old-school design. I liked Gnm Fandango, but it's definitely a relic of its day. — Jeff Cork



7.5 | Citizens Of Earth

Platform PS4, Wii U, PC, Vita, 3DS
Release January 20 Rating E10+

Citizens of Earth is a cleverly written, charming, and nostalgic game hindered by repetitive combat combined with a high encounter rate. Those who see past the minor design flaws and few technical problems will find a strong Earthbound-inspired RPG that is entertaining from start to finish. — Brian Shea

Far Cry 4	8.75	Jan-15
Fernix Rage	6.5	Nov-14
Game of Thrones: Episode 1 - Iron from ice	8.5	Feb-15
Geometry Wars 3: Dimensions	8	Feb-15
Gauntlet	7	Dec-14
Heartstone ² Goblins vs. Gnomes	9.25	Feb-15
Jam Croft and the Temple of Osiris	7.75	Jan-15
Legend of Grimrock II	7.75	Jan-15
Legend of Korra: The Lego Batman 3 Beyond Gotham	5.5	Jan-15
Lords of the Fallen	7.5	Jan-15
Lumino City	8.5	Jan-15
Middle-earth Shadow of Mordor	7.5	Jan-15
Nayer Alone	8.25	Nov-14
Neverending Nightmares	6.5	Feb-15
Neverending Nightmares	7.75	Dec-14
Pier Solar HD	7	Dec-14
Project Spark	7.5	Dec-14
Resident Evil HD	9.5	Feb-15
Scrolls	7.75	Feb-15
Sherlock Holmes: Crimes & Punishment	8	Dec-14
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Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com
Editor n-Chief
Andy McNamara andy@gameinformer.com
Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com
Managing Editor
Matt Bertz mattbertz@gameinformer.com
Senior Features Editor
Matt Helgeson matt@gameinformer.com
Digital Editor
Bryan Vore bryan@gameinformer.com
Reviews Editor
Joe Juba .oe@gameinformer.com
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Matt Miller millier@gameinformer.com
News Editor
Michael Futter mike@gameinformer.com
PC Editor
Daniel Tack daniel@gameinformer.com
Senior Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Clark jeff@gameinformer.com
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com
Senior Associate Editors
Jeff Marchiafava jeffm@gameinformer.com
Tim Turi ttm@gameinformer.com
Associate Editors
Kyle Hilliard kyle@gameinformer.com
Kimberley Wallace k.w@gameinformer.com
Brian Shee brianshee@gameinformer.com
Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com
Senior Production Director
Curtis Fung cufung@gameinformer.com
Graphic Designers
Isiah Azarshtin Tobin isiah@gameinformer.com
Jason Pitzer jasonpitzer@gameinformer.com
Samm Langer samm.langer@gameinformer.com
Video Designer/Programmer
Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com
Video Producer
Ben Hanson hanson@gameinformer.com
Video Editor
Wade Wojcik wadewojcik@gameinformer.com
Creation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinfo rmer.com
Audience Development Manager
Paul Hedgcock paul@gameinformer.com
Senior Product Manager
Lisa Wosner lisa@gameinformer.com

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Hearthstone			
Goblins vs. Gnomes	9.25	Feb-15	
Kingdom Rush: Origins	8.5	Feb-15	
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Tales from the Borderlands			
Episode 1 - Zero Sum	6.5	Feb-15	
Terra Battle	8	Jan-16	

Kingdom Rush: Origins	8.5	Feb-16
Scrolls	7.75	Feb-16
Terra Battle	8	Jan-16

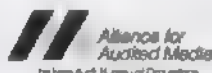
Associate Publisher **Rob Barm** rob@gamemaker.com
West Coast Advertising Sales Director
Damon Watson damon@gamemaker.com
East Coast Advertising Sales Director
Suzanne Lary Middaugh suzanne@gamemaker.com
East Coast Advertising Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gamemaker.com
West Coast Advertising Associate
Janey Stringer janey@gamemaker.com
Marketing Coordinators
Rachel Castle rachel@gamemaker.com
Mark Burcer mark@gamemaker.com

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A Long Time Ago

Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of Star Wars: Dark Forces

Every kid who grew up loving Star Wars dreamed about piloting an X-Wing or firing a blaster at a group of charging Stormtroopers. Many Star Wars games of the '80s and '90s put players in the cockpit, but the feeling of truly having your boots on the ground in George Lucas' legendary world remained elusive. All that changed on February 28, 1995, when a group of LucasArts developers combined their love for the sci-fi franchise with Id Software's genre-defining first-person shooter formula.

LucasArts enjoyed its heyday in the '90s. The studio put out legendary adventure games

like Day of the Tentacle and Indiana Jones: The Fate of Atlantis. The team also found its footing in the Star Wars franchise, including unforgettable space flight games like X-Wing and TIE Fighter. Daron Stinnett, former LucasArts developer and director of Dark Forces, points to X-Wing as the game that revitalized his passion for the franchise and the first-person perspective.

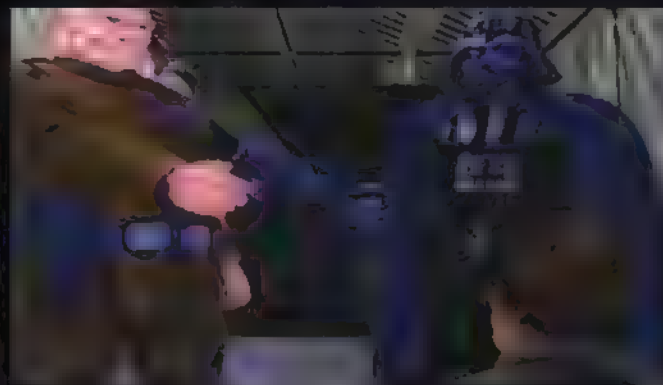
"In the mid to late '80s and '90s I kind of lost touch with [Star Wars]," says Stinnett. "It honestly wasn't something that I thought about until I sat down in the cockpit and flew an X-Wing [in Star Wars: X-Wing]. I was so floored and it all came back. I just marveled at how amazing it was that 15 years earlier I had sat in a theater and watched someone fly an X-Wing in a big battle and here I was flying and being Luke Skywalker in that X-Wing."

When the Dark Forces development team wasn't busy brainstorming ideas for the game, the creators were blasting each other into bloody pulp in Doom deathmatches. These marathon multiplayer sessions heavily influenced the design of Dark Forces. Doom mode swapping out Imps with Imperial soldiers were popular in the early '90s, but

LucasArts was committed to make an authentic Star Wars experience.

The game stars Kyle Katarn, a politically agnostic mercenary hired by the Rebel Alliance who eventually becomes a devotee of the movement. The first mission tasks players with storming an Imperial base to steal the plans for the Death Star. Katarn's trusty blaster sways on screen as he drops in on a group of Imperial officers standing at their black and gray consoles with an array of colored buttons. A MIDI remix of John Williams' classic score sets the tone as red and green blaster fire is exchanged. The first mission of Dark Forces was a transformative experience for any fan of the series, and video games in general.

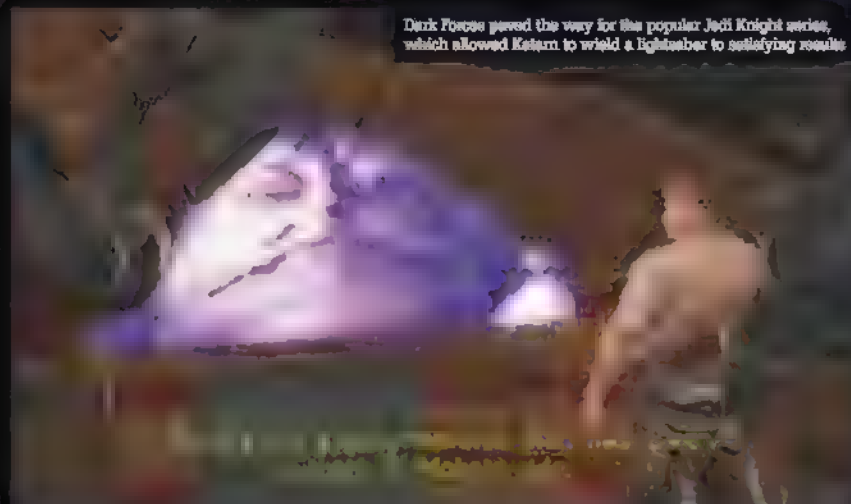
The Jedi Engine—inspired by id's Doom Engine and created by LucasArts—injects a new degree of level design into the first-person genre. Unlike Doom's sprawling labyrinths, the Jedi Engine allowed developers to stack rooms on top of one another in order to create more complex environments. But before the magic could happen, Stinnett needed people who understood creating 3D spaces.



by Tim Turi

WorldMags.net

Dark Forces paved the way for the popular Jedi Knight series, which allowed Katarn to wield a lightsaber to satisfying results



Jabba strips Katarn of his weapons before forcing him to fight a Krayt dragon



Unfortunately, LucasArts' designers were primarily skilled in creating 2D games or drawing sets for adventure games. Stinnett needed to look elsewhere for the people that would help build the Star Wars universe.

"I realized pretty quickly that architects are the people that know how to make environments," Stinnett says. "So I went to the University of Berkeley and connected with the architecture school over there and found a couple of guys who were also big gamers and convinced them to come work for LucasArts and join the Dark Forces team as architects and level designers."

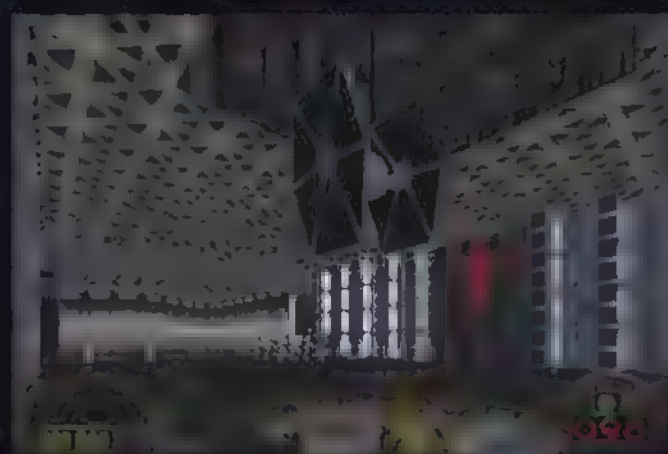
These new hires, along with the rest of the team, helped make Dark Forces more than Doom with a glossy coat of Star Wars paint. Where the Doom series featured fast, frenetic gameplay set within dozens of abstract mazes, the locations of Dark Forces were designed with a form and function in mind. The vertical city of Nar Shaddaa features treacherous, vertigo-inducing catwalks, a brightly lit skyline, and crudely constructed polygonal ships floating through the air. A fully realized TIE fighter soars out of an Imperial hanger as the ground forces duke it out. Unlike other "Doom clones" of the era, Dark Forces transported Star Wars fans to a universe they always dreamed of inhabiting, and demonstrated the immersive potential of first-person shooters.

Dark Forces not only captured the imagination of Star Wars fans and a burgeoning FPS audience, Stinnett and his team received praise from Id Software. Kudos from the developers that inspired Dark Forces' gameplay was great, but what about the creator of the universe himself? Stinnett recalls watching George Lucas play the game for the first time at a press event celebrating its release.

"I was pretty proud of what we'd made, and I was kind of waiting for him to be blown away," Stinnett says. "And we had Stormtroopers and [Imperial officers], and we were shooting them and he was not happy that we were shooting those guys. He said, 'You shouldn't have those guys in there because they're too human looking. There's a reason I made Stormtroopers, because I didn't want to feel like you're shooting other humans.' I was like, 'Really? That's the thing

you have to say about the awesome game we made?' I was so destroyed. But then I showed him how to play it and he got into it, and by the time cameras got rolling he was running around and jumping over pits and shooting things and having good fun, at least for the cameras I'll say."

Had those cameras been pointed at the rest of the world as players booted up their PCs to play Dark Forces for the first time, they would've likely captured looks of awe rivaling those of wide-eyed moviegoers back in 1977. After 20 years, Dark Forces stands tall as an impactful and important innovator in the FPS genre and one of the most impressive Star Wars games ever created. ♦



Katarn confronts infamous bounty hunter Boba Fett in Nar Shaddaa



Where In The World Was Lara Croft?

When it comes to globetrotting, few characters in any medium match what Lara Croft has accomplished over the course of her illustrious tomb-raiding career. From her home in England to the ends of the Earth (and everywhere in between), Lara

has had her passport stamped countless times. With the series recently undergoing its second reboot, the hardened heroine will likely be adding more pins to her world map in short order. *by Brian Shea*



1. Peru

- Tomb Raider (1996)
- Tomb Raider: Legend (2006)
- Tomb Raider Anniversary (2007)

2. Greece

- Tomb Raider (1996)
- Tomb Raider Anniversary (2007)

3. Egypt

- Tomb Raider (1996)
- Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation (1999)
- Tomb Raider Anniversary (2007)
- Lara Croft and the Temple of Osiris (2014)

4. Atlantis

- Tomb Raider (1996)
- Tomb Raider Anniversary (2007)

5. China (Great Wall)

- Tomb Raider II (1997)

6. Venice, Italy

- Tomb Raider II (1997)

7. Mediterranean Sea

- Tomb Raider II (1997)
- Tomb Raider: Underworld (2008)

8. China (Tibet)

- Tomb Raider II (1997)

9. China (Best guess - Xi'an)

- Tomb Raider II (1997)

10. England (Croft Manor)

- Tomb Raider II (1997)
- Tomb Raider III: Adventures of Lara Croft (1998)
- Tomb Raider III: The Lost Artifact (2000)
- Tomb Raider: Legend (2006)
- Tomb Raider: Underworld (2008)

11. Alaska

- Tomb Raider II: Golden Mask (1999)

12. Nevada

- Tomb Raider II: Golden Mask (1999)
- Tomb Raider III: Adventures of Lara Croft (1998)

13. India

- Tomb Raider III: Adventures of Lara Croft (1998)

14. England (London/South UK)

- Tomb Raider III: Adventures of Lara Croft (1998)
- Tomb Raider III: The Lost Artifact (2000)
- Tomb Raider: Legend (2006)

15. South Pacific

- Tomb Raider III: Adventures of Lara Croft (1998)

16. Antarctica

- Tomb Raider III: Adventures of Lara Croft (1998)

17. Scotland

- Tomb Raider III: The Lost Artifact (2000)

18. Paris

- Tomb Raider III: The Last Artifact (2000)
- Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness (2003)

19. Cambodia

- Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation (1999)

20. Rome

- Tomb Raider: Chronicles (2000)

21. Russia

- Tomb Raider: Chronicles (2000)

22. Ireland

- Tomb Raider: Chronicles (2000)

23. New York

- Tomb Raider: Chronicles (2000)

24. Prague

- Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness (2003)

25. Bolivia

- Tomb Raider: Legend (2006)

26. Japan

- Tomb Raider: Legend (2006)
- Tomb Raider (2013)

27. Ghana

- Tomb Raider: Legend (2006)

28. Kazakhstan

- Tomb Raider: Legend (2006)

29. Nepal

- Tomb Raider: Legend (2006)

30. Thailand

- Tomb Raider: Underworld (2008)

31. Southern Mexico

- Tomb Raider: Underworld (2008)

32. Jan Mayen

- Tomb Raider: Underworld (2008)

33. Andaman Sea

- Tomb Raider: Underworld (2008)

34. Arctic Ocean

- Tomb Raider: Underworld (2008)

35. Central America

- Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light (2010)

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